Return to Hawkins by beneathawesternsky

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Summary:

(SEASON 2 SPOILERS, partially set after the end of season 2) Erin Pearson hasn't been a number for years. She still bears the 004 tattoo on her forearm-- a constant reminder to fight her former captors, and to free others still under their control. After escaping Hawkins National Laboratories when she was nineteen, a now-24-year-old Erin returns to Hawkins when she hears of the closing of the Hawkins National Laboratory, not believing it to be true. She must investigate the validity of the news she hears, and determine just what has been happening in Hawkins since she ran away. She meets a prickly police chief who has secrets of his own, teaches Eleven to control her powers, and seeks to make Dr. Martin Brenner, who shares a complicated and morally grey relationship with her, atone for his misdeeds.

1. Bargaining With the Devil

Author's Note:

> This is going to be set after season 2. There WILL be spoilers. I am reworking what I have written after the prologue to fit what's happened in season 2. The prologue will remain unchanged. Finally, I am a creature who needs encouragement. A comment is always appreciated, even if it's just two words, it makes my day. And it makes me a more prolific writer, because I know I'm writing for someone who wants me to continue!

As tendrils of smoke curled up from her lit cigarette, Erin Pearson thought casually about how long it had been since she last smoked. Was it four months? Six? In truth, she always found it easy to give up the habit, but sometimes she allowed herself a week of indulgence. When the stress was too much.

And right now, the stress was too much.

She flicked the ash away and took a long drag, if only to stop her hands from shaking. Her hands were caked in nearly dry mud, and her clothes would have to be rinsed in her hotel bath tub before she could even send them down to be laundered by the hotel. But for the moment, she forced herself to not think of the future.

She would have liked to not think of anything, but that was impossible. She sat at the root of a great oak tree, and looked down at the mound of fresh, moist earth that had been piled over Seven’s body.

She reached the end of her cigarette, and stubbed it out in the earth, which was growing wetter in the beginnings of a spring shower. As she blew out the last of the smoke, she stood, and looked down at the unmarked grave she’d spent over an hour digging.

“I’m sorry I didn’t get here sooner,” she said. She crossed her arms over her chest to keep herself as warm as possible.

Seven was only a few years younger than Erin, but they had been close at Hawkins National Laboratory. Things were different at the lab when they were children. Children—assets as the researchers called them—were allowed more freedoms than those who followed them in years to come. They played together. They were educated by a private tutor of sorts. When they were trained for the field, few of them objected.

Erin did. But not at first.

She blinked the rain out of her eyes, and thought that at least Seven was spared the worst of what she herself had experienced. Seven, with her homely appearance and sweet disposition.

Erin wondered if Seven had been using a name. Had she taken back that part of her humanity? The nametag on the diner uniform said Marie, but Erin knew that it was only a part of a mission. They were given names for new missions, and just like one would change their socks, the assets changed their identities at a moment's notice.

But Erin had been wearing this identity for enough years that she no longer felt like Four, only a number. She felt like Erin. And she was going to spend the rest of her life making it so that the children brought up in Hawkins National Laboratory never felt like a number ever again.

Seven had been her first attempt to turn an asset against Hawkins. Seven had packed her bags that morning. Erin had spent the night convincing her to abandon her mission, and she had succeeded.

Erin had been too complacent. Too careless. She left Seven for only an hour, and when she returned she found her in a pool of her own blood, dead from a bullet to the brain.

She would have to be smarter if she was going to save the others before they could get to them. Erin thought a moment that Hawkins might just kill all their assets, so they couldn't lose them, like they had with Seven, but the years put into the MKUltra program would prevent them from doing so. Erin knew that even now, after all she had done, the CIA, Hawkins, MKUltra… they would do whatever it took to turn her back. To regain what they had lost. So for that, Erin

was thankful. She might be able to reach some of the others before they did.

She left the woods behind the diner where she had buried Seven, and drove her rental car to her hotel. She plodded down the carpeted hallway of the hotel to her room, her wet clothes chilling her body.

She unlocked her hotel room door with her plastic card key, its face a series of hole punches. She withdrew the key, and slid it into the back pocket of her wet jeans.

When she closed her door, she could barely see in the dark room, a stark contrast to the bright hallway. Her eyes landed on an outline on her bed, an outline of a person. Jumping to action, Erin darted to the desk in the entryway, and pulled the drawer open. The gun that she had stashed there was gone.

Her heart raced, and she looked up at the person on her bed. They rose calmly, and stepped into a beam of light that peeked through the curtains. It was him. Perceptibly older, but it was him.

He produced the gun she had been searching for, and held it in his open hand. “Looking for this?” he asked.

Erin turned to flee, her hand finding the doorknob. She opened it only a foot before he ran behind her, simultaneously slamming the door shut, and pressing her face first against it.

“Don’t run, Four,” he murmured into her ear. It sent chills down her spine, and turned her stomach. Echoes of memories threatened to overwhelm her, but she stifled them, and struggled to break free from his hold.

“Stop,” he said, and pressed the gun against her back, right by her kidney. It would be a fatal wound. She knew he would take the shot if he had to. She stopped struggling, and he pulled her away from the door.

“Why did you do it?” she asked through gritted teeth. Tears fell from her eyes.

“You know why,” he said. “She was ready to leave with you—and we

can't have that. You caused enough problems when you escaped. We can't have you spreading doubt among our assets."

"Then why don't you kill me?" she shouted through her tears that fell silently.

He turned her around to face him. He kept an arm wrapped around her waist, and the revolver against her side.

"*You know why*," he repeated, his voice heavy, his mouth mere inches from hers.

She pressed her lips together defiantly, and looked into his blue eyes with a fierce anger he had never seen before.

Her grey eyes were still the same, but they had lost all of the innocence they once had. He was responsible, and for that he would always feel a mix of emotions.

"Let me go," she said.

"Four, I can't do that, you know it."

Erin huffed. "My name is *Erin*," she said, staccato.

"To me, you'll always be Four," he said, and took his hand from her waist, and put it on the side of her face.

"To you, I'll always be an object. A weapon you can point this way or that. Something you can use as you see fit." She hurtled those last words with disgust.

"Everything I did for you, I did to prepare you for our work. You were part of something that was bigger than what your life would have been. You can still be a part of that."

"I'd rather burn in hell," she said.

"We need you," he said. "One of our subjects has such raw potential, she reminds me of you. But she doesn't have the control you have. She needs someone like you. A mentor. Come back," he caressed her cheek with his thumb.

“And help you train another instrument of death? Help you rob someone else of their innocence? Or are you no longer giving that lesson to your assets?” She was silent a moment as she searched his eyes. “Oh, does the CIA *not* want their agents versed in seduction anymore? Was I just an exception… *papa*?”

Dr. Brenner frowned. He hated to hear that word coming from her mouth. But he had served as a father figure to her, and other children like her. He had loved her. Perhaps more than the rest. And so much differently.

“I did what I was told,” he said, his voice wavering.

“And you hated every minute of it, I’m sure,” she said, fresh tears joining those that had dampened her cheeks already.

“I don’t recall you objecting,” Brenner said, anger playing on his face a moment. “You came to me willingly, in the end. Many times.”

“I was too young. What eighteen year old knows how to separate sex from love? Or were you counting on that?” she argued. “You took advantage. I only pray you won't do that to the one you say reminds you *so much* of me.”

Brenner shook his head, and pressed his lips together. “You were my exception. The only one. I’m not proud of it, but I don’t regret it.”

Brenner wiped away her tears with his thumb, and leaned down to claim her lips with his.

Erin pressed her hands on his chest to push him away, but he caught her with his arms, and held her to him with strength that was surprising despite his frame.

Erin pulled her mouth away from his, and grunted in disgust—disgust in him, and disgust in herself. “Stop!” she commanded.

Brenner looked down at Erin, her dark brown hair hanging damply, still dripping from the rain.

“You can stop me, Four,” he said, backing her into the door, and looking down on her. “Of all the assets in the program, you were

always the strongest. You still are. We both know if you want to, you can stop me. And not just for a moment, but for good."

He kissed her again, dropping the revolver on the carpeted floor, and moving his hands up her damp clothes to rest underneath her arms.

Her rigid frame relaxed for a moment, but she still stood there frozen. His tongue brushed her lower lip lightly, and her resolve crumbled. Her body betrayed her, and she wrapped her arms around his shoulders, kissing him deeply. Satisfied in her relenting, Brenner put pressure under her arms in a gesture that was, for them, one that was so familiar it was like slipping into a warm bath. He lifted her off her feet, and she wrapped her legs around his waist.

He held her there a moment, kissing her. When he turned, he walked the few steps that there were between them and the bed. He put her down urgently, but full of a tenderness that she knew he had. He was always gentle with her—except for those nights she didn't want him to be.

He pulled away from her, and knowing that he was safe from her extraordinary powers, he loosened his tie and began unbuttoning his shirt.

Erin watched, and did nothing. When he noticed her hesitancy, Brenner shrugged off his jacket, and took his place between her legs. He pushed her further up the bed, and kissed her firmly.

She responded instantly. Her head swam when he took his mouth away from hers, and placed it on her neck, applying pressure with his tongue to the spot he knew would drive her crazy.

It elicited the moan he wanted from her, and he smiled his wolfish grin. Her hands involuntarily went to his white hair. While she breathed a moment, not yet recovered from what he had done to her, Erin watched while Brenner unbuttoned the plaid flannel shirt she wore, exposing her freckled stomach. She wore no undergarments, which caused him to exhale and flex his jaw. He had missed her.

His mouth descended to her chest, and he kissed her collar bone, moving down to lightly lick her nipples enough to see them harden

into small, pink peaks. When he had accomplished that, he roughly pulled the flannel shirt down her shoulders, which she helped him remove.

When he had finished, she put her hands on his chest, and helped him unbutton the remaining buttons. When she reached the last, she pulled his shirttails out, and his shirt joined hers on the floor.

Her skin was still cold and damp, which made quite the contrast to his, which was dry and warm. She shivered slightly against him as he quickly unbuttoned her wet jeans. He pulled back, and knelt on the bed as he pulled her shoes off, and began to peel her wet jeans from her, exposing her skin to more cold air. What remained of her clothing were her panties, also wet, clinging to her.

He pulled back from the bed, and stood beside it to take his shoes, and the rest of his clothing off, which he draped over a nearby chair. Standing beside the bed, Brenner allowed his former protégé to look him over in a mixture of shame, defeat, and wanting.

He was already half hard, just from looking at her. For all the beauty she had at nineteen, it had multiplied many times over in the five years it had been since he'd seen her. He knelt onto the bed, and lowered himself onto her, between her legs, warming her cold and damp skin with his. He claimed her mouth again in a kiss, and tilted his hips into hers, brushing against her through her damp underwear. He grew harder, rubbing himself against the spot he knew was making her wet.

He pulled away to look down at her, and shifted to the side to gain access to her, placing a hand on her apex. He brushed her sensitive spot with his thumb, and with each pass, nearing the edge of her useless undergarment. He pushed the fabric to the side, and felt for her wetness with his middle finger, and finding it, elicited a moan from her.

He smiled possessively, and began circling the spot that caused her hips to jerk involuntarily. When she was nearing the edge, she opened her eyes, and looked into his in resigned defeat.

"*I hate you*," she said, a tear falling down the side of her face, and

disappearing into her ear.

He pulled her underwear down her legs, and discarded it on the hotel room floor. He positioned himself between her thighs, and pausing just at her entrance, feigned thrusting into her a few times, causing her to swivel her hips, hoping to end the wait.

He looked down at her struggling to entice him to give her what she wanted, and brushed his nose against hers affectionately.

“I know,” he said, barely a whisper, and with that, thrust forward, and did not stop until he had buried in her completely. She cried out as he filled her quickly, hitting the spot inside that was a source of so much pleasure.

They stayed that way a moment, losing themselves in a kiss that conveyed so many emotions. Longing, disgust, comfort, and enough love that made what they were doing just bearable enough.

He picked up his movements, and thrust into her with urgent need. She responded in kind, moving her hips to best meet him. She came the first time within a minute, tensing around him, her nails digging into his shoulders as he buried his head into the crook of her neck.

He took her wrists from his shoulders, and clamped his hands over them, pinning them above her head. He cocked a knee up, supporting himself as he leaned over her, putting distance between their chests. He looked down at their coupling, and sighed in satisfaction. He pulled out and thrust in, watching as he did so. Erin strained against his grip, which held her arms above her head, but he knew she did not want him to let go.

He shifted his focus to her arms above her head, and gazed at the tattoo she bore on the inside of her forearm. It was upside down, but he could still see the *004* that she had been branded with as a small child. It excited him, and he quickened his pace, forcing her to come again, which drew his own orgasm from him.

He thrusted until he was completely spent, spilling his seed inside her. When he had finished, he let her arms go, and settled into her, kissing her sweetly, which she, surprisingly, responded to by kissing

him with as much ardor.

She was drunk on passion, and had given herself over. At least for the moment.

He stayed inside her, and pulled back enough to look down into her steel grey eyes, and at the dusting of freckles on her cheeks that he had dreamt about so much since she escaped the lab those years ago.

“I know it may not seem like it,” he murmured, still catching his breath. “But I do love you.”

Her eyes regained their alertness, and she brought her hand to his cheek, a gesture she used to use in bed when their lessons in the bedroom had stopped being lessons, and became something more.

“I know you think you do, Martin,” she said, and turned away from him, breaking their connection. She had called him by his first name, something she had never done before.

When Brenner had been instructed to teach Four the art of pleasuring a man to get him to do what she wanted, she had still been calling him papa. In the depths of his mind, he knew that it turned him on when she called him that just before their “lessons”, but he had always repressed that thought. When she began to want him, she called him Doctor. Despite their lessons being secret, the other assets took note of this change.

But she had never called him Martin, for she had never felt his equal. She was always the pupil, and he the mentor. The dynamic tainted any feelings they did have for each other back then.

Her use of his name drove home the fact that Four had become a woman, and was no longer his to command. Even if she agreed to come back to Hawkins, she was different now. She would no longer be his to command. Not completely.

“Come back to Hawkins, and let me prove it to you,” he said, laying on his side, gazing at her as they always had done in bed.

“I won’t kill for you, Martin,” she said. “I want a normal life.”

“You know you will never have that,” he said, taking her chin between his fingers a moment, brushing his thumb under her bottom lip. “But if the killing bothers you so much, then you don’t have to do it. But come and teach the others, the younger ones, what you know. How you control your gifts.”

“Teach them how to kill, you mean,” she said.

Brenner sighed and his jaw flexed a moment. She stared into his eyes a moment, and shivered. He got off the bed, and turned down the linens beside her. Erin looked at the bed sheets, and for a moment considered getting dressed and fleeing. One look in his lined eyes was enough to change her mind, although she slid under the sheets reluctantly. She knew there was no use in pretending they hadn’t just fallen back into their old ways.

He followed her, and slid under the sheets, resting a hand on her hip as she faced him.

“What you trained to do is a service to the country,” Brenner said. “We taught you to defend yourself. We taught you to use lethal force. But there are other ways to serve. Your abilities are staggering. If you really put your mind to it, you could serve and teach—no blood on your hands.”

Memories of Brenner punishing Erin for failing to comply with his wishes came to mind. She wondered if this new girl had been subjected to the same. In her heart she knew she had. Maybe if she went, she could put a stop to that. But she still could not stomach the thought of helping those who had robbed her of a normal childhood. Who had poisoned and drugged her mother, changing her in the womb.

“Just blood on theirs,” she said, staring at Brenner’s chest absently. He said nothing.

“If I come, I want your word that I can leave whenever I want. If I want out, no one will stop me.”

Brenner shook his head. “You have my word.”

“No more punishment,” she said. She looked up into his eyes, and she knew he was remembering. “That stops.”

Brenner thought a moment, and nodded.

“I’m not your weapon, Martin,” she said. He shook his head.

She propped herself onto her elbow, and looked down at him. She laced her fingers through his hair, and gripped it before tilting his head back. He sighed in pleasure, and she leaned down to kiss him aggressively. She quickly straddled his hips, and with a tilt of hers, she found him hard again already. She brought her weight down on him, and they both moaned in pleasure at their joining.

“I belong to no one,” she warned him, waiting, and when he nodded, Erin moved her hips.

Erin gripped the doorframe, her duffel hanging from her shoulders. She peered over at a sleeping Doctor Martin Brenner, her former lover, her mentor, her father figure. The fact that he could be all three of those things turned her stomach. As she stood there, she realized Brenner was probably telling her the truth, or he wanted to believe it was the truth—she would not be harmed if she came back to Hawkins. But to go back into the jaws of the very monster she had escaped years ago went against her instincts.

Yes, she was abandoning other assets to years of psychological abuse, abuse that she might even be able to prevent if she gave Brenner what he wanted.

But she couldn’t give it to him. She could picture it. Going back to the lab. Becoming his lover. Enabling those people to exploit children with special gifts, and ultimately getting sucked back into being an active agent.

She wouldn’t do it. She would try to reach other active assets, and to try to turn them against Brenner and his team. She would deny the small voice in her head that told her she wanted to be with him. It

wasn’t right. It wasn’t good for anyone. It could never be.

He stirred in his sleep, and for a moment Erin thought he might wake up, but he continued to sleep soundly. Taking this as her cue to leave, Erin took one last look at Brenner, and left.

2. New Beginnings

Her shirt clung to her body with cold sweat. In her dream, Erin heard a scream that echoed in her mind, and followed her to consciousness. It was her own scream that followed her. She sat upright, and clawed at the sheets that were like restraints. She kicked them off, still half in her dream, still fighting the faceless monster there.

When she finally came back to the world of the living, Erin panted and tried to make sense of her dream.

A tear in the dimensional fabric brought forth chaos and death. The fabric had torn wide open in the lab. She knew it was Hawkins. But it looked like hell had leaked through the tear. How did it get there? And the girl… *who was the little girl?*

She closed her eyes, and steadied her breath, hoping to find the girl from her dream, who had pushed the faceless being back through another tear. Using her power, she made her mind blank, and she found her. In that black expanse, she saw the little girl on the ground. Her face was almost purple, and blood trickled from her nose and ears.

It was her. The one Brenner had asked her to help. Erin put her hand to her mouth in fear that she was already dead. She knelt down and put her hand on the girl's shoulder. She gave her a gentle shake.

"Come back," she said, smoothing her hand over the child's buzzed hair. That hair was a dead giveaway—she was an asset.

The little girl opened her bloodshot eyes and looked into Erin's.

"Where are you?" she asked, trying to rouse the small girl.

"Upside… down," she said, her voice cracking.

Erin stood up abruptly, and the little girl vanished in smoke. As she left the girl psychically, Erin sat upright in her hotel room bed, throwing the sweat-dampened sheets off her. She rushed to the bathroom, and barely made it before she knelt over the toilet and

threw up.

She had said *upside down*. And the tear that she saw. It was to there. *That place*. In the time since she first saw it, Erin had never quite found a name for it that fit. She just called it 'the other place'. She'd only seen it in her dreams, but it was the only place that truly frightened her. She wasn't always sure it was a real place. Until now.

And now Brenner's prodigy was there.

Before she could consider the implications, a soft knocking came at the door.

"Erin?" a male voice called from behind the bathroom door. "Are you okay?"

Erin spit into the toilet one last time, and flushed before shakily standing at the sink to rinse her mouth out. She splashed her face with water last, and drying her skin off, she opened the door to Tabor, clad only in his undershirt and boxers.

"I'm okay, Tabor," Erin said. She tossed the towel into the tub, and flicked the light off before returning to her double bed next to Tabor's. Erin settled this time on the side of the bed that wasn't drenched in sweat.

"You didn't sound okay," Tabor countered. He peered at her through tousled sandy-blonde bangs. Erin had been meaning to cut his hair for him for some time now, even though it was very much "in" in late 1983.

"I just… I had a dream. I think…" Erin looked at the twenty-year-old sitting on his bed, hanging on her every word. "I think something's happening in Hawkins. Something bad."

Tabor's breath caught in his chest. He hadn't anticipated going back to Hawkins so soon. Not yet. Not without backup.

"Don't worry," Erin said, smoothing her hair back. "We still have work to do. We still have assets to reach. Whatever's happened in Hawkins can wait."

“Are you sure?” Tabor asked, relieved, but still unsure.

“I can’t bring down MKUltra myself, Tabor. That’s why we need the other assets, the ones who can be turned.”

“You say that, Erin,” Tabor said, fiddling with his blanket, “but you’re the strongest of all of us. You could just go in there guns blazing.”

Erin smiled sadly. “I know it might seem like that. But I have my limitations too. You may not see them, but they’re there, and when I start to exhaust myself, I open myself up to risk.”

Tabor nodded, and scooted down under his blankets. Minnesota in the fall was exceptionally cold, and this hotel room didn’t have the best heating.

“I don’t want you worrying about what’s going on in Hawkins,” Erin said, mindlessly running her thumb over the slightly raised skin of her tattoo. “We need to get some sleep so we can handle what ever comes with approaching Five tomorrow.”

“You think he’ll come with us?” Tabor asked, looking at his own tattoo, *009*, sharing the moment silently with Erin.

Erin rubbed at her eyelids. “No. But we have to try. His power is limited, but useful.”

“You can do what he does, but better,” Tabor reasoned. He was afraid of Five, as he was right to be. He didn’t care if it showed to Erin.

Erin swallowed.

“You know it’s different than what he does, Tabor,” Erin said. Tabor knew the subject was closed, and when Erin clicked the desk lamp between them off, Tabor gave up and went back to sleep. Erin stared at the popcorn ceiling while Tabor occasionally snored. Was returning to Hawkins the right thing to do? Was the girl past saving?

Feeling guilty, Erin made up her mind, and went to sleep.

“Don’t let him touch you, Tabor,” Erin shouted at the two men who were about to face off. Five made a mad dash for Tabor, who feebly crossed his arms and created an invisible shield between them. Five balled his fist and rammed it into the air, making contact with the psychic shield. Tabor was good at keeping his guard up in times of need, but the look on Five’s face made him falter.

When Tabor flinched, Five reached forward and grabbed Tabor by the neck, making skin-to-skin contact.

“*Calm down*,” Five commanded, and Tabor went slack. He slumped lazily against the wall of the hallway, now useless to their purpose. Erin huffed—Five’s empathic persuasion lasted days sometimes. Tabor would be useless against Five.

“Shit,” Erin said, and put her hand up in front of her. “*Stay still*!” Erin said, and Five complied. Erin had to choose her words carefully with this underdeveloped power.

Five’s brown eyes flew open as he was made still by Erin’s power. He huffed.

“You’re getting better with that one,” Five said.

Erin was now a few steps from Five. She wiped her nose on the back of her finger, and looked at it. This was the only one of her powers that made her bleed anymore.

“I wish it wasn’t necessary, but you gave me no choice,” Erin said, stopping before her old rival.

“Go to hell, Four,” he growled. “This won’t hold me forever, you know it.”

“*Erin*,” she corrected. “It doesn’t have to be this way anymore. The running, never staying in one place. The killing. We can stop that. And save other kids from the horrors we endured.”

Five laughed. “You think you and mewling little Nine can stop MKUltra? The CIA?”

“Maybe with you, we can. We haven’t gotten to everyone yet. Please,

Five," Erin said.

There was silence between them. Erin looked into Five's eyes, considering if she should read him, his thoughts and feelings. Somehow Erin knew if she used any more power on him, she would lose him. He had the eyes of a caged animal. She had no idea how long the persuasion would work on him—he was always strong, but now he seemed like he could handle himself better. Tentatively, Erin raised her hands to Five's temples.

"Don't!" Five barked, knowing what Erin was about to do.

"Tell me why you won't come, and I won't read you," Erin said, her eyes pleading with his.

"Is not wanting to die not explanation enough?" Five countered.

Erin was not satisfied with this answer, and when her fingers met his temples, she saw the images that had been playing in his mind since Erin and Tabor found him. When she had finished reading his thoughts, Erin pulled back and put her hands down.

"I'm so sorry, Five," Erin said. "What you did was terrible—a terrible *accident*, but Brenner can't hold that over you. You don't owe him anything."

Five laughed, and finally was able to move, free of Erin's power. He did not run, or reach for Erin to use his empathic persuasion. He backed away from Erin. "You don't know yet, do you?"

"Know what?"

Five laughed, and backed away towards the fire escape. "You didn't feel it? What happened in Hawkins last night?"

Erin opened her mouth, but remembered the little girl in the other place. The Upside Down she had called it.

"Yeah. You saw it."

"Did *you*? Can you see the other place?" Erin's eyebrows knit together.

"*Do I have your power, Four*?" Five huffed and smiled. He raised his hands in defeat. "Let's just say, I don't think you're going to have much success getting any other assets to storm the gates at Hawkins with you. I'm getting as far away from Hawkins as I can."

"You—"

"Do me a favor, Four. Don't try to find me. If you find me, then *they* find me. And I want out of this."

Erin's eyes widened. So Five would not come with them, but he was leaving MKUltra. Whatever had happened at Hawkins had scared Five enough to drive him to go AWOL.

As she stood there, thinking about the little girl, Brenner's new favorite asset, Five had slipped out of the fire escape, and into the alley in downtown Minneapolis. After a moment, she mentally shook herself from her stupor, and looked down at Tabor, whose blissful expression made her sigh.

"Come on, Tabor," she said. She pulled at his arm, and he rose slowly. "You're gonna need some time out."

"What's he so concerned about?" Tabor asked, his eyes almost glassy. "I'm not worried."

Erin patted his arm, and led him down the stairs. "I know."

"Something's bothering me," Max said, kicking the same rock down the sidewalk as the six of them walked out of the Hawk movie theater in downtown Hawkins, Indiana.

"What?" Dustin asked.

"Doc and Marty," Max said. This was her first time seeing *Back to the Future*—it was the third time for all the boys.

"What about them?" Caleb asked, sidelong.

"Why are they friends?"

“Why not?” Dustin asked, his voice a little louder than he anticipated.

“I mean, *how* did they become friends?” Max asked, looking at the boys, and Eleven.

The boys were all quiet. “Does it matter?” Mike asked. He had warmed up to Max a little bit, but not too much. He knew Eleven was still struggling to accept Max.

“It’s just weird,” Max said. They rounded the corner, and walked the rest of the block down to the arcade.

The kids escaped the summer heat in the arcade, where they fanned out and picked their respective games.

Mike, Will and Eleven found the game they wanted, and all three dug in their pockets for what ever quarters remained after the purchase of their movie tickets and popcorn.

As the boys pulled out quarters, Eleven’s eyes were drawn to the cluster of kids whispering and pointing at her. Mike lifted his head to look at his girlfriend, and found Eleven’s attention drawn away. Finding the source of Eleven’s anxiety, he put his hand on her arm.

“Ignore them,” he said. “They’re just nosy assholes,” he said, this time a little louder.

The group looked away in embarrassment.

“Mouth breathers,” Eleven said, and turned to the game, where Mike had deposited a quarter for her.

“Don’t worry, El,” Will said, “once school starts, they’ll get bored and move on.”

Eleven put her hair behind her ears and looked at Will appreciatively. The past month had been the best of her life, despite the stares she got from the residents of Hawkins, who all wanted to know everything there was to know about Jim Hopper’s new adopted daughter.

Some said she was the same girl who'd shattered the window at the grocery store, but everyone who knew the truth about Eleven was quick to cover her origins. Laughingly they would brush off the insinuation, and change the subject.

Eleven didn't really care if they stared. She was now a part of the world, however protected and heavily watched she was by her dad, Chief Jim Hopper. Let the mouth breathers stare. She was home.

Hopper drove down the main road in Hawkins with Eleven beside him, happily staring out the window.

"Did you have fun today?" Hopper asked, looking over at Eleven.

Eleven smiled back at him, and nodded.

"Good," Hopper said. Things had been quiet in Hawkins. Eleven had been able to transition to life in Hawkins without much of a fuss. Still, he worried when she went out without him. He supposed he might always worry a little bit.

"How was the movie?" Hopper asked, trying to pry a little more out of his quiet adopted daughter.

"Good," Eleven said. Communication with anyone was always a bit difficult. Hopper shot her a look, and she breathed in deeply before giving him a bit more by way of conversation. "Better than TV."

Hopper laughed. "You watch enough of those daytime shows, anything's better than that."

Eleven smiled. Before she could make a reply, Hopper all but slammed on the brakes.

"Woahhhh," he said, looking over at the place that used to be Benny's Burgers.

The windows that had been newspapered for over a year were now sparkling and clear. The lights were on, and a single car was parked in the parking lot. Unable to stop himself from doing so, Hopper pulled into the parking lot next to the parked car, and tried to peer

through the window into the restaurant.

Eleven tensed. The last time she'd been to Benny's Burgers, she'd seen the first person who showed her any kindness shot in the head by one of the MKUltra agents. Since Benny's death, the Hammond family had closed the restaurant indefinitely. Benny Hammond had been Hopper's friend since they were kids. He took his death hard, but didn't show it.

Inside, Hopper could just make out a woman walking into the kitchen with a box. He hung onto his steering wheel in disbelief.

"I never thought they'd open this place up again. I didn't know Benny's mom was gonna open it back up," he said absently. He looked over at Eleven, and mentally admonished himself for distressing Eleven.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I just can't believe it."

"Is it… bad?" Eleven asked, looking at the woman who had come out of the kitchen, pushing her dark brown hair out of her face. She grabbed another box, and disappeared into the kitchen again.

"Not exactly," Hopper said tentatively. "But I don't know that woman," he said. "She's not Benny's kin."

Eleven remained quiet.

"You stay here," he said, and shut down the truck. "I'm just gonna go clear this up." He assessed Eleven's worried expression. "It's fine. You'll see me through the window, okay?"

Eleven swallowed and said nothing. Hopper was going to do what he was going to do. He was the chief of police in this town. She was used to him doing things like this, even when he wasn't on the clock. Still in uniform, he did still feel he had to sniff things out.

Hopper left Eleven in the truck, and approached the old diner slowly. He tried the door, and found that it was open. The bell that hung over the door since the 1950s rang faithfully. He walked in, and placed his hands on his hips authoritatively.

“I’m sorry, we’re not open yet,” a light voice came from back in the kitchen.

“Jim Hopper, chief of police,” Hopper said, trying not to sound too formal. This was, after all, a courtesy call. Or so he told himself. He wasn’t being nosy. Not at all.

The dark haired girl came out from the kitchen, her upswept hair falling down in places and falling into her face. She wiped it away, only to leave a spot of dirt on her cheek, of which she was ignorant.

She smiled, and approached Hopper, still in his full uniform.

“Is everything alright?” she asked. She stood more than a head shorter than him.

“Yeah,” he said, trying to sound casual. “Just didn’t know Benny’s was being opened again.”

“Oh,” she said, looking back at the chaos she was trying to get in order. “Yeah. I bought the place from Mamie, and now I’m opening it back up. Just moved here.”

“Mamie Hammond sold the diner?” Hopper asked in disbelief.

“Yeah,” she said, “said she wanted to retire, went to live in Escanaba, Michigan with her sister.”

Hopper was quiet a moment.

“I’m sorry, what did you say your name was?” the woman asked, her hands on her hips, looking up at Hopper.

“Jim Hopper,” he said.

She smiled, her slate grey eyes glinting. She extended a hand. “Erin Pearson,” she said. Hopper shook her hand, which she looked down at to see that it was almost black.

“Oh my,” she said, looking down at her hand. “I am so sorry.” She grabbed for a towel on the old-fashioned counter top, and began wiping away the grime. “This place is in a little need of some elbow

grease."

"It's fine," Hopper said. He looked around the diner, which looked just the same, save for the boxes that rested on some of the tables. "What have you got in store for the place?"

"Oh," Erin said thoughtfully, looking at her diner with a small glint in her eye. "I wanted to give Hawkins something I think it's sorely been missing."

"And what's that?" Hopper asked, curiously watching Erin. She seemed awfully young to be running her own diner.

Erin smiled again. "That would spoil the surprise."

Hopper couldn't help but smile, faced with a smile like hers. She did seem to smile a lot, didn't she? She didn't feel suspicious, but still. Benny's was a staple in Hawkins. The thought of it changing affected him deeply.

"Benny's is a staple in Hawkins…" Hopper said. "I'd hate to see it turn into one of those institutional type places."

Erin looked up and evaluated what she saw in the police chief's blue eyes. It would be so easy to read him, his emotions were off the charts. She may not even need to touch him to see his thoughts. But it wasn't the time for her to reveal herself to him just yet. He was on the defensive. Not the best time to learn that the woman who bought your dead friend's restaurant had psychic abilities like your adopted daughter.

"Chief Hopper," Erin started gently, "I know Benny's is an important fixture to this community. The last thing I want is to neglect its history."

She saw him visibly relax at this. Still, his police instincts kept him suspicious of the stranger in front of him.

"I'm going to try to recapture some of that nostalgia. Same menu, same recipes, but with a few of my own thrown in, here and there. And with a little bit of sprucing up, here and there."

The two of them stood silent for a moment. Erin's eyes wandered out to Hopper's car, where she saw Eleven watching intently.

"Is that your daughter?" she asked thoughtfully.

Hopper turned to look at Eleven before turning back. "Yes. Jane."

"Well, would she like to come in?" Erin asked sweetly. "I'm not ready to serve anyone yet, but I'd love to meet her."

"Oh, we'll stay out of your hair," he said. "I just wanted to stop in and…"

"And snoop," Erin said with a small laugh.

Hopper chuckled in defeat. "Yeah, I guess so," he said. "Even still, I do like to meet new business owners, make sure everything's going well, and to extend a hand from the police. If there's anything you need, Hawkins Police Department would be happy to help."

Erin pressed her lips together in a thin line, bordering on a smile. "Thank you, Chief. I appreciate that."

"No problem, Miss Pearson," Hopper said, nodding slightly and retreating towards the door.

"Chief?" Erin said before Hopper's hand touched the door.

"Hmm?" He asked, turning to Erin.

"I open next Friday. I would be honored if you and Jane would come for the grand opening. Or, *re-opening* I should say."

Hopper made an expression that might be considered a smile, but for all its awkwardness fell a little short. "We'll be there."

"I look forward to it," Erin added softly, and without another word, and with the tell tale jingle of the door chime, Jim Hopper left Benny's Burgers with a bee in his bonnet. Anything so fair had to be treated with a healthy degree of skepticism. He started up the truck, and backed out of the parking lot without a word to Eleven.

3. New Friends Don't Lie

Notes for the Chapter:

> Thank you for all the great comments! As always, they keep me going, even when I have grown up things that draw my attention. I always try to carve out some time where I can. Hope you enjoy this update!

Jim Hopper was a firm believer that mornings were a sacred time, reserved for two very important tasks: coffee and contemplation. Just as he was pouring his first cup of coffee in the police station, the bickering started.

“You couldn’t get a girl like that if you paid her,” Powell said to Callahan. The two of them leaned against their respective desks, drinking their own coffee, but bickering all the same.

“I’ll have you know that I went out on a date with Francine Meadows three years ago,” Callahan rebuffed, adjusting his glasses.

“Uh, and who is Francine Meadows married to?” Powell asked. Callahan was silent. “Exactly. I don’t know how you managed that date, but clearly she was out of your league.”

“That—that doesn’t mean anything. We just didn’t have anything in common,” Callahan said into his coffee.

“Mmmmhmmm,” Powell said, resting his case.

Hopper ignored this, so accustomed to their friendly banter that he generally stayed out of it.

“You met the lady who owns Benny’s, Chief,” Callahan stated. Hopper sighed.

“That I did, Phil,” Hopper said, turning to his officers. “What’s your point?”

“Well, Calvin here says I wouldn’t be able to get her to go out with

me," Phil said. "And I say I could."

Hopper's face contorted in a mixture of annoyance and confusion. "Okay, and why is this a topic of discussion?"

"She moved in next door to me," Phil said proudly. "I met her and her brother and sister. I was thinking of asking her out."

Hopper sighed, remaining impassive. "Go for it, kid," he said. "She's about your age." He turned to walk into his office before he paused.

"You said brother and sister?" the Chief looked back at Callahan and Powell.

"Yep," Phil nodded. "Brother's out of high school for sure, but I think the sister's going to Hawkins High when the school year starts up."

Hopper was quiet a moment. He considered Erin's age—she had to be, what, twenty-five, twenty-four? Awfully young to be caring for two siblings.

"She mention any parents?"

Calvin and Phil straightened up a bit, sensing the Chief's policing inquiry.

"Said they died in an accident or something," Phil said.

The three of them were quiet a moment while Hopper mulled this over.

"She's a nice lady," Phil reasoned. "And the kids seemed happy enough."

"You wanna follow up, Chief?" Calvin asked, curious as to what the Chief was thinking.

"No—" Hopper said quickly. "No, everything's probably on the up and up."

Hopper left the two behind and retreated to his office. He sat down and drank half of his coffee before he made up his mind. Something

about Erin Pearson, the much-discussed newcomer in town, wasn't right. Something didn't fit.

Hawkins had been buzzing about the new resident since she made herself known, and Hopper purposefully ignored all gossip. None of it was worth a shit anyway. Hopper reminded himself what they say about people who talk about other people being simple minded, or some such thing.

But he couldn't help himself. He felt an obligation to this town. He'd been to another dimension, fought off the hellish creatures that came with it, and been involved with a CIA-run, secret program. And that was just the start of it.

This girl probably was just a nice new resident to Hawkins, but he could not shake the feeling that there was more to her than she let on. She had a secret. There was no other explanation for why a girl with no ties to Hawkins would move here with her younger siblings, and open up a diner.

Everyone in town had been buzzing with gossip about her, and just about everyone Hopper knew planned on going in to Benny's the night of the reopening. No matter his feelings about someone else running Benny's, Hopper now had no choice. His investigative nature made up his mind. He would figure out her story.

"Four, you know what today is, don't you?" Brenner said, sitting on Four's bed next to her. She had her legs crossed, and she looked over at him expectantly

"My birthday," she said, not sure where he was headed.

"Not just any birthday," he said. He tucked her long brown hair behind her ears. "Your eighteenth birthday."

Four smiled demurely. She'd been waiting for the day they told her she was ready to graduate to be a field-ready agent. Her combat skills were up to par, her Russian language skills were perfect, her mind reading was nearly perfect, her pyrokinesis was stronger every day, and she only had the nosebleeds anymore when she used persuasion on people. If that

wasn't ready, she didn't know what was. The Reds wouldn't know what hit them.

"You'll be an active agent soon, but we have one more lesson that we want you to learn," he said, clasping his hands together and letting them rest between his legs.

"Anything, Papa," she said. It hit him in the gut. His vocal cords still felt the strain of the argument he'd had with the CIA coordinator he answered to. Faced with having MKUltra, his father's project, taken away from him, Brenner was forced to comply.

"Four, you know as an agent, you'll be expected to… do things that might to most people seem… unsavory," he said. Four's grey eyes watched his expectantly, and she nodded. If only she knew what he was about to ask of her.

"There are things you can do, Four, that the other assets can't. Certain gifts." He paused, and looked at her. She'd grown to be so beautiful. He remembered her as a child and couldn't believe this young lady before him was the same girl. "You've grown to be such a beautiful young woman."

Four smiled and blushed, as she often did when complimented.

"Four, the CIA wants you to be versed in the many ways you can get information from someone. You've learned the combat, the espionage, the language. But there's… a subtler language you can use."

"German?" Four asked, confused.

Brenner laughed, but his stomach roiled.

"No my dear," he said, and looked at his hands. "No, there are things a man might want from you. Things that he might let slip a great deal of information to have. You can bring a man's guard down with the promise of these things." He licked his lips. "Four, I know that you and Five have a bit of a friendship of sorts. But you know that Five sees you differently than the others here."

Four flushed. She looked down at her fingernails, cropped short and neat. The children at Hawkins all acted like siblings, but not Five. Four always thought he hated her, but it was exactly the opposite. She hadn't been able

to look Five in the eyes since he'd kissed her those months ago.

"It's okay, it's only natural," Brenner said, forging ahead. "But these are the kind of things the CIA wants from you. They want you to take those instincts and to use them."

"W-with him?" Five asked, looking at Brenner with alarm.

Brenner was quiet a moment. "No dear."

"W-with who?" she asked. She stared him down, and he felt drawn in by the deep grey cast of her eyes, framed perfectly by her freckled cheeks.

"Four…" Brenner said, his breath catching in his throat. "You know I am not your father. I am not any of the other assets' father."

"I know," she said. "But you care for us."

"I do," he said. "I know I am not supposed to say it, but I care for you the most."

Four was silent. She still had not connected the dots.

"When faced with an alternative, I'm afraid I could not consent. The man they posed as an alternative to be your tutor was…" Brenner paused and thought of the young, handsome, but dead-eyed soldier they proposed. "It wasn't right. He didn't know you like I do."

"Like... you do?"

"Four, I have to be your tutor in this."

Four's complexion blanched, but she did not shrink away from him like he thought she would.

"They threatened to take me off the program if I did not consent," he said, and Four could hear the sadness in his voice. "And I dare not think what they would do if you do not consent."

Four exhaled quickly, wavering a moment. Her eyes darted all over the room, everywhere but Brenner's. She quickly scrabbled to make sense of what he had said.

“Four,” he said, bringing her back to the present. He put his hand on hers, and held it comfortingly. “Four, say something.”

Four looked at Brenner, the man who’d been her surrogate father, her mentor, for as long as she could remember. She had come to MKUltra later than the other assets, and could still remember her parents, but Brenner had doted on her much like a father in the ten years she had been at Hawkins Laboratories.

“This is the best way?” she asked. “There are no others…?”

“None that I would trust with you,” he said.

Four pressed her lips together, and drew herself up. “I want to be the best. I want to be in the field. I will follow the orders that are given to me.”

Brenner’s stomach fell even further. She was so naïve, so innocent of the outside world, she had no idea what that meant. She followed dutifully. She had been a petulant teenager sometimes, but she was the most disciplined of all of the assets. But just this once, he had secretly hoped she might protest.

“Good girl,” he said.

Four cleared her throat, and looked at Brenner. “Wh-when… will we begin?”

He tipped her chin up with his knuckles, and caressed her chin with his thumb, as he had done hundreds of times before. He rose to leave, to let her think, and tilted her head up to face him. He leaned down, and placed a kiss on her lips, light and chaste, but so much different than any that came before.

“Not tonight.”

Erin startled awake. She still felt his lips on hers, and for a moment she touched her fingertips to the spot that still tingled. She hated her dreams about Brenner, but couldn’t help when they came. It was never long between them. No matter how much she had run since she last saw him there in that hotel room, she couldn’t get far enough away. She hadn’t had the courage to return to Hawkins until she

heard whispers that he was no longer in charge of the program.

Still, someone else had taken his place. MKUltra was still active in Hawkins after the Will Byers incident. From seeing the little girl in the Upside Down, to seeing Five's face as he fled, to reading the newspaper clippings about Will Byers, Erin had enough information to know that MKUltra wasn't gone. But she stayed away.

It was the encounter she had with Kali that brought her back. That had shaken her.

Kali Had found Eleven—or rather, Eleven had found her. And went back to Hawkins. To save her friends. And if this little girl, who couldn't be any older than thirteen, could easily return to Hawkins to face the horrors of the Upside Down, what did that say about her, a grown woman of twenty-five?

Erin looked at her clock radio—5:47 AM. Far too early to head to the diner for the opening that evening, but too late to go back to sleep.

Admitting defeat, Erin rolled out of bed and dressed in cotton shorts and a hoodie, laced up her running shoes and hit the sleepy streets of Hawkins, still dark in the pre-dawn light. She might not be an agent of MKUltra anymore, but she would not neglect her physical fitness. If she had gained anything from that godforsaken program, it was discipline.

She watched as the streets of Hawkins slowly woke up, and her residents gently rolled to early morning. Cars passed her politely as she sweat despite the perfect temperature of Hawkins on a summer morning. She thought nothing of the passing cars until one slowed beside her. She looked at the vehicle and noticed the insignia on the door. It was Jim Hopper, the police chief.

And the man who was posing as Eleven's adoptive father.

Erin slowed and made eye contact with the Chief, who pulled over to a complete stop beside her. She panted, and rested her arms on the bottom of the open window.

"I thought that was you," Hopper said, leaning over to speak to Erin.

“I didn’t realize you were a runner.”

“Couldn’t sleep,” she said, wiping sweat from her brow.

“Wish that was my solution to not being able to sleep,” Hopper said, taking a shot at self deprecating humor.

“You should come run with me sometime,” Erin said, catching her breath finally.

“Oh god, I haven’t run since my days in the Marines,” Hopper said. “I think you’d run laps around me.”

“I don’t know, Chief, you’re a pretty tall guy, I bet at the end, our pace would match up anyway.”

“Alright, *maybe*,” he said.

“You on your way to work?” she asked, curious as to why he felt the need to stop.

“Yep,” he said. “I didn’t mean to bother you, I just wanted to say that I’ll see you tonight. I’m bringing Jane, and she’s meeting a few of her friends.”

“Oh, wonderful,” Erin said, planting her hands on her hips, transferring her weight from one foot to the other.

“Anyway, I’ll let you get back to it,” he said.

“Oh, I was just about done anyway. I’m glad for the break.”

“Well, you want a ride back?” Hopper asked. Just as the words came out of his mouth, he wasn’t sure why he’d spoken them. He was supposed to be keeping an eye on her, not buddying up to her.

“Oh, I couldn’t put you out, I don’t want to make you late,” she said, fascinated by his offer. Clearly the police chief wanted an excuse to talk to her.

“It’s fine,” Hopper said, and opened the car door for her from the inside. She chuckled and slid in beside the chief.

“Thanks,” she said, unzipping her hoodie a few inches to cool off. “I’m just on—“

“Bilberry Road,” the chief finished. Erin looked over at the chief in amused wonder. “One of my officers told me he lives next door to you. Small town and all that,” he said.

The chief made a u-turn in the road. “So the rumor mill made its way around to you, huh? So tell me, what’s the dirt? What tragic tale are they spinning for me?”

Hopper stared straight ahead, deciding how he should approach her.

“Your parents died in a tragic car crash, and you’re taking care of your brother and sister now,” Hopper said simply.

“For once the rumor mill gets it right,” Erin said, staring out the window, relishing in the cool breeze blowing through her sweaty hair in its messy braid, cooling her down.

They were silent a few seconds before Hopper turned up the heat. “What the rumor mill doesn’t specify is why Hawkins.”

“I’m sorry?”

“What ties do you have to this place? This isn’t exactly Indianapolis or Chicago. People don’t just move here.”

“So did the residents of Hawkins just spring up from holes in the ground?” Erin asked with a laugh.

“You know what I mean.”

“I’m sorry Chief but I don’t see why that matters.”

Hopper looked over at her. She had turned to face him, and had put her arm up on the back of her seat. Her posture seemed at ease, but her eyes said another thing.

“This town’s been through a lot these past few years. I’m sure you’ve heard of the Will Byers situation, and then what went on with the lab about nine months back. Getting shut down.”

They turned onto Bilberry Road. Hopper slowed down and stopped in front of her rented house.

“Chief, I haven’t lied to you. My parents did die in a car accident, and I am taking care of my brother and sister now,” Erin’s voice took on a serious quality, and for once her face seemed heavy. The smile that seemed to always be playing at the corner of her mouth was now gone.

“But because I don’t want to lie to you, I won’t tell you what brought me to Hawkins,” she said. Hopper opened his mouth and scoffed lightly.

“Not right now,” she added. He looked back, expectantly.

“Come to the diner tonight, like you said you would. Stay after closing, and I’ll tell you why I’m here. I suspect because you’ve been dealing with Hawkins Lab that you’re not used to people being upfront with you, but I promise you that I am not like them.”

Hopper stared at her, unable to speak. How much did she know? *What* did she know?

“Like I said, Chief,” she said. “I won’t lie to you. But I’d rather tell you tonight.”

With that, Erin opened the creaky door of the police truck, and hopped out, shutting it firmly. She looked back at him through the open window and considered his expression. Was it anger mixed with confusion? Or confusion mixed with a little bit of something else?

She shook her head and held his gaze. “I’m not like them.”

She turned before he could think of what to say, and disappeared through her front door, leaving him in his stalling truck, his thoughts racing.

4. Coming Clean

Notes for the Chapter:

> Hoping to start the transition into a Hopper/OC story now. I will be peppering some Brenner/OC flashbacks in here and there, but worry not, this IS a Hopper-centric story, folks. Thanks for all of you who commented and left kudos.

“And go to bed before midnight,” Hopper said, probably for the third time in thirty minutes.

“I know,” Eleven assured him.

Hopper was silent. He trusted Eleven to stay at Mike’s for the night, but how much longer would that be the case? They were still kids, but kids grew up faster and faster these days. He knew he’d be having “the talk” with Eleven soon, but he couldn’t bear it yet. Eleven, thankfully, still had much to learn about simple social skills, so when Hopper asked the Wheelers to watch Eleven for the night, he knew everything would be fine.

“Why won’t you tell me why I’m spending the night at Mike’s?” Eleven asked.

Hopper sighed. “I know, I know, ‘friends don’t lie’, but I don’t even know what I would tell you. I don’t know anything yet. But I’ve gotta check, okay?”

Eleven nodded. They had been working on trust, and Eleven was learning that Hopper really did act in her best interests. Like a *real* parent, not one who simply called himself her “papa”.

“Is it safe?” she asked, trying not to sound too concerned.

Hopper rubbed at his beard a moment. “I think so. It doesn’t feel like before. But I just have to make sure.”

Eleven nodded, and they spent the rest of the ride over to Benny’s in comfortable silence.

Hopper's jaw nearly dropped when he saw how full the parking lot was. Even in Benny's heyday, back in the 50s and 60s, it wasn't this full.

"Jesus," Hopper said, parking along the street. "Guess the burgers must be better than the original, if that's at all possible."

"Maybe," Eleven said, closing her door behind her as the two of them got out.

"That's my girl," Hopper said, putting his arm over Eleven's shoulder and pulling her to him as they walked. "Ever the skeptic."

Eleven smiled, and held onto the back of Hopper's jacket.

Hopper barely heard the jingle of the bell over the door over the din of laughter, talking, and the sound of Ray Charles singing *Mess Around*. Hopper stalled in the entryway a moment, taking in what Benny's looked like. All of the grime and grit that had built up since Benny Jr. took over was gone. It was like Hopper had stepped into a time machine, and was looking at what Benny's was in the 1950s and 1960s.

Every surface was pristine. The lights had been changed. It was as if everything about the place had been there all along, but all it took was a bit of a shine. Hopper reached deep within himself to pull out any offense he might feel at the change, but found none. What remained was a panging nostalgia for his youth, spent chasing girls and getting into trouble. Before Vietnam, before losing Sarah, and before the Upside Down.

Hopper snapped himself out of his reverie, and looked for Eleven and the boys. They were standing in the back, where they congregated around a new fixture of the diner—four or five arcade games that had taken the place of a few of the booths. Hopper saw Joyce Byers and Karen Wheeler, two of the chaperones for the children in the back, sitting at a table by the booth the kids had left empty. They waved him over.

Hopper sat, and the two women resumed their conversation.

“Can you believe this place, Hop?” Joyce asked.

“Yeah,” he said, incredulous.

“Well, I guess I know where the boys are going to want to eat from now on,” Hopper said, looking at the kids standing around the arcade games.

Karen rolled her eyes. “I know,” she said.

“Hey, thanks for taking Jane tonight,” Hopper said to Karen.

“Of course,” Karen said, smiling. “Mike was so excited, he has the whole evening all planned out. And Nancy was very sweet about letting Jane sleep in her room.”

Joyce put her hand sweetly on Hopper’s arm, and squeezed. She felt a swelling of love and affection for Eleven and Hopper together. Seeing the two of them make a home made her beyond happy. Joyce had come to feel like a mother-figure to the girl.

“Right then,” a bright voice said, drawing them from their conversation. The three turned to find Erin, clad in a sky blue dress uniform, with white cuffs and lapels. Erin stood before their table with two plates in hand. She set Joyce and Karen’s food down in front of them, and looked down at Hopper.

“What can I get you, Chief?” she asked, no hint of their morning conversation present in her face.

“Oh, I’m fine, thanks,” he said. “Watchin’ the waistline,” he added with a bit of humor, to his female companions.

“We’ve got more than burgers and fries, Chief,” Erin said, and pulled a menu from behind the napkin holder, placing it before him.

“You do look great, Jim,” Karen said, “but you have to get *something*.”

Hopper inhaled, and put the menu back in its place. “Just bring me anything,” Hopper said, looking up at the new proprietor of Benny’s. The two shared a moment of eye contact that conveyed more than words could.

He was there for an explanation. Everything that happened before then was background noise to him.

The lamp light in the parking lot buzzed with the gentle hum of electricity, and moths fluttered overhead. Hopper leaned against the exterior wall of Benny's, overlooking the now-empty parking lot. He flicked the ash away from his unfiltered cigarette, a habit he had yet to kick. He'd lost twenty pounds, but was still clinging to some of his old vices. Baby steps, right?

Benny's was now empty, and Hopper had been waiting outside since the Wheelers took Jane home with them. He had enough time to sit and run over the possible explanations that Erin might have for her presence in Hawkins.

All of them seemed crazy, and none of them did. The fact was, Hopper had seen enough in the past two years to know that he knew nothing about the world.

The door with the bell opened, and out walked the sandy-haired boy who had been grilling burgers all night, and the brown-haired teenage girl who had been waiting tables, followed by Erin. Hopper assumed the two were Erin's brother and sister.

"Go straight home," Erin was saying to the two of them. "And don't wait up."

"How are you going to get home?" the teenaged girl asked. She looked over at Hopper, who stamped out his cigarette on the pavement.

She spoke, and never took her eyes off him. "I'll have my own police escort," she said, and smiled down at her younger sister.

Her sister looked at her with concern.

"It's okay," Erin said, quietly, so only she heard. "You have to trust me."

Hopper now stood only a few steps from the three of them.

Erin's siblings looked at Hopper a moment, and without a word, followed their sister's wishes, getting into the Saab that Hopper knew to be Erin's. The two of them watched silently as the two drove off, leaving them alone, finally.

Erin led the way into the diner, and Hopper followed. Hopper stood expectantly as he watched Erin make her way to each of the windows, pulling the roller curtains down. When the last had been covered, she walked to the police chief.

"Sit," she said, indicating a booth. "Please," she added, noting his hesitancy. "I'll be right back."

Hopper sat, and Erin returned with two bottles in hand. When she sat, she opened both with a bottle opener, and placed one before Hopper. Erin drank from hers, and sighed, releasing the stress of her opening night at Benny's.

He didn't touch his.

He stared her down, but something prevented him from delivering a stinging one-liner, or a threat. He had to trust that she would get there in her own time. And he was right.

Erin stared at Hopper's hands a moment, and then looked up into his eyes. She sighed slowly, and looked back at the inside of her own wrist. Her fingers played a moment on the clasp of her watch. She unlatched it, and paused a moment as Hopper watched her. He could sense her nervousness. Pushing past it, she removed the watch, and set it aside.

Finally, Erin held her arm out, and showed Hopper the tattoo that the watch hid.

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Hopper's heart nearly stopped. He stared a good moment at the tattoo before looking up at Erin's face, which was expectant, yet bordering on sad. This could have been some sort of elaborate trap set by MKUltra, a last gasping effort to reclaim some control over Eleven, but the look on her face assuaged at least that one fear.

“What is this?” he asked. He didn’t mean the tattoo.

Erin took her arm from off the table, and put it under the table, clasping her hands in her lap in a guarded gesture.

Erin’s mouth ran dry, and she cleared her throat. Why was she nervous *now*? She looked at the table, rather than his eyes. “I wasn’t lying when I said my parents died in a car crash. They did. I was eight years old when MKUltra orchestrated my parents’ murder, and I was taken into the program so they could use me. Like they wanted to use Jane.”

Hopper’s eyes flashed. Erin looked up at him finally.

“I got out. About six years back, I escaped the lab. I was nineteen. And I’ve spent the last two years or so trying to turn other assets—that’s what they called us—against MKUltra.”

“You’re not getting anything from Eleven. That’s done. She’s out.”

Erin put her hands up defensively. “That’s not what I’m here for.”

“Then tell me what you *are* here for,” Hopper nearly barked.

“My brother and sister… not really my brother and sister, but they’re like me, and when you share abilities like ours, you start to feel a sort of kinship…” she looked at Hopper’s expression, and continued, “we can teach Jane to control her gifts. It’s a lonely life, Hopper, being one of us. That’s what they did, they cut us off from forming personal attachments…”

“She’s got plenty of *personal attachments* now, thanks, so you’ve wasted your time here,” Hopper said. He stood to leave, and walked towards the door. Erin stood, and walked a few steps, following him.

“She still bleeds when she uses her powers, doesn’t she?” Erin said. This stopped Hopper in his tracks. “I can teach her to control her powers. Safely. The nosebleeds, they…” *What exactly about the nosebleeds?* Erin thought. Does he need to know just how worried he should be?

“Over time, they can hurt us.”

Hopper turned around, and surveyed the woman before him in the pale fluorescent light.

“You didn’t just come to Hawkins out of the goodness of your heart,” he said. He walked back to where Erin stood, and stopped less than a foot in front of her. It was a challenge, a prompt to be more forthcoming. In the silence that followed, Hopper had a moment to consider their proximity, but his racing heart prevented him from dwelling on it.

“No,” Erin said. She swallowed. “I need to know what happened here. What happened in Hawkins. I need to know, because none of us are going to be at ease until we know. Until we can put an end to what ever remains of MKUltra. Chief, you’re not the only one who’s taking care of a child of Hawkins Lab. I have to cover my bases. So I know what I need to do next.”

Hopper stood over her, and considered a moment. He ran his hands over the scruff of his beard, the beard that perpetually looked like an afterthought.

He sighed, and sat at the table, where his beer had begun to sweat. He mindlessly wiped the condensation away, and drank from it. Erin hid the smile at the corner of her mouth, and sat opposite him.

Hopper drank generously from his bottle. “I’m gonna need a few more of these.”

Erin rubbed at her eyes. When Hopper had finished telling her the story of everything that had happened in Hawkins since Will Byers went missing, Erin sat silently for a moment. It was a lot to take in. She knew about the Upside Down—had known about it her whole life. But now it was real. It came with its own terrible monsters that bled through the tear in the fabric of reality.

Erin pushed all that aside, and thought for the moment about MKUltra. They had essentially retreated from Hawkins, and to everyone who knew anything about the program, it seemed like they were now defunct. But Erin knew better.

She looked at the clock. 3:07 AM.

“This doctor,” she said, her head resting on her hand pensively. “This…”

“Dr. Owens,” Hopper said.

“Dr. Owens. You think you can trust him?” Erin asked. He had secured Eleven’s new birth certificate, listing Hopper as her father. This man sounded like his heart was in the right place. But how much of MKUltra’s toxic ideology did he share?

And was the program merely dormant? Would it come back worse than ever?

“Yeah,” Hopper said, running his hand over his hair. “He swears that the program is done.”

Erin shook her head in disbelief.

“The program *I* know… The CIA wouldn’t just let it go.” Erin looked at Hopper sadly. “They put too much time into us, too much money.”

“Well, you were the one recruiting the other kids raised in the lab. The assets…”

“Everyone I have reached came with me before the Will Byers situation blew up the first time. Or ran away years before, like I did. No one but Five knew anything about it. And he was scared. Now that I know what came out of the Upside Down, I see why.”

“And you say you knew about the Upside Down? Even before Eleven opened the door?”

Erin nodded, and spun an empty beer bottle mindlessly.

“How?”

Erin swallowed, and looked up at Hopper. His blue eyes, though tired like hers, bore into her. Perhaps it was the cop in him that made him stare at her so intensely, like he was trying to figure her out with a look, or perhaps it was something else. Erin stuffed the thought away

and flushed slightly.

“My… abilities,” Erin said, watching Hopper’s expression. “Some of us share the same abilities. Some of our abilities are different. One of my abilities allows me to see into the Upside Down even when it’s closed. I never thought it was real. Not until Eleven opened the door.”

“But how?” Hopper pressed.

Erin bit at her lip. She’d never exposed herself so much to someone who didn’t already know what her abilities were. She knew if he knew the full measure of her abilities, the mind reading, the persuasion, the pyrokinesis, the way he treated her would change forever. It was an odd sensation, this fear of exposing herself to him. Why was it so hard?

“I’m putting a lot on faith, here, Erin,” Hopper said. “If I am going to trust you, I need to know everything.”

Everything. Erin’s stomach flipped. No. Hopper didn’t need to know everything. At least not yet. He didn’t need to know about Brenner and her. Tabor and Jillian knew, but they didn’t really *know*. None of the assets really *knew*, but speculated. Erin knew she was afraid to say it out loud. Saying it out loud made it true. Made it a reality. A shameful reality that she had naively fallen for Brenner. And what did that say about her?

But why did Erin care how Hopper saw her?

Erin took a steadying breath.

“It’s easier if I show you,” she said. She held out her hand on the table, which Hopper looked down at.

“Give me your hand,” she said. Hopper hesitated a moment, but relented. He placed his larger hand in Erin’s.

Erin gripped his hand firmly but gently, and closed her eyes. For a moment, nothing happened, but soon Erin had formed the connection, and Hopper’s thoughts played in his mind like a jumbled up highlights reel.

Images flashed in Erin's mind as she sorted through his thoughts. Hopper and Eleven sharing a pile of Eggos with piles of canned whipped cream, Hopper walking through the Upside Down in a hazmat suit, Hopper standing in front of the door to the Upside Down with Eleven. And then there she was, Erin, standing in the diner with a smudge of dirt on her cheek. And again, Erin, panting and leaning against the door of his truck, sweaty from her morning run.

These last images startled Erin, and she severed the connection, letting Hopper's hand go.

"Jesus Christ," Hopper said, putting his hand on his forehead, rubbing at his eyes a moment. He panted slightly, but hid it from Erin.

"Sometimes I can slip in undetected," Erin said, looking at her palm. "Other times, when the person I'm reading is on the defensive, it can be a little more… invasive."

Hopper chuckled, which surprised Erin.

"You said '*one* of your abilities', earlier?"

Erin held his gaze, and nodded. This drew another breathy laugh.

"Okay…" Hopper said, and rubbed at his eyes. "I think—I think that's enough for tonight." He stood unceremoniously, and looked at the door. Clearly, Erin had rattled him.

"Hopper, wait," she said.

"Look, Erin, this is a lot to process," he said. "If I'm going to let you see Eleven, I have to ask her. She's got just as much right to decide as I do."

"Hopper—*you've got to drive me home*," Erin said, stopping Hopper from getting any further to the door.

He turned and shook his head, amused at his own thoughtlessness.

"I'm sorry, of course," he said, and ran his hand over his beard a moment.

“I’m sorry if I freaked you out,” Erin said. “I think we could both use some coffee.”

“Yeah,” he said. He sat. It didn’t seem like he needed much convincing.

Erin gathered the beer bottles on the table, and walked off to the kitchen clinking and clattering. When she’d placed them in the glass bin, she made a pot of coffee, and brought two mugs to the table.

Hopper pulled out a pack of cigarettes from his pocket, and shook one out.

“Do you mind?” he asked, pausing before he lit it.

Erin shook her head, and pulled the ashtray from beside the napkin dispenser.

“Only if you don’t mind that I bum one,” Erin said, grabbing the pack before Hopper answered.

She pulled one out, and tapped it lightly on the table, waiting for Hopper to finish with his lighter.

“They’re unfiltered,” he warned.

Erin put the cigarette to her lips, and grabbed Hopper’s hand, which held the lighter. She pulled it closer, and Hopper struck the lighter for her. He thrilled slightly at her touching his hand, but pulled it away and lit his own in turn.

They sat like that for some time, drinking their coffee and smoking.

“You don’t bleed?” he asked finally, punctuating their silence.

Erin tapped the ash into the shared tray, and picked a loose bit of tobacco from her tongue.

“Only with one of them,” she said, referring to her gifts.

Hopper took a long pull from his cigarette, and thought a moment. “Do I want to see that one?”

Erin shook her head. “I don’t like to use it if I don’t have to. None of us do, really,” Erin said. “Tabor and Jillian, they just want live a normal life.”

“I worry sometimes,” Hopper confessed.

“About what?”

“Eleven, she…” he said. He sighed, and stubbed his cigarette out. “Maybe this is what having a teenaged daughter is like. But she gets so angry, and when she’s having a tantrum she just… uses it.”

Erin could feel the emotion radiating off Hopper. He had relaxed a bit —he was projecting very clearly now. Erin wouldn’t have to push much to read him again. She felt how he felt when Eleven lashed out. Frustrated, frightened though he was loathe to admit it to himself.

“It gets better,” she said.

“What, her psychic tantrums?”

Erin laughed, and tapped her cigarette out next to Hopper’s. “No, having a teenaged daughter.”

He smirked. “That’s reassuring.”

“If you’ll allow me to meet with her, teach her…” Erin started gently. “Those outbursts won’t be so bad. If she has a way to channel her energy positively and safely.”

Hopper sighed. “I just want her to have a normal life. I don’t want her living like a lab rat.”

Erin smiled to herself. “She’ll never be a normal girl. She can lead a normal life, but she’ll always have that. And if she doesn’t learn to control it, harness it, it could have disastrous consequences.”

“And why weren’t they teaching her that at Hawkins Lab?” Hopper drank from his mug, wrapping his big hand around the mug, relishing in its warmth.

Erin’s breath caught in her chest. “Because they didn’t know how.

They knew how to push our boundaries, but not to respect them, control them. Brenner, he… he came to me, and asked me to come back. To teach her."

"He what?" he asked.

"About two years ago now," she said, images of her and Brenner in bed flashing in her mind. She pushed them away quickly, as if Hopper could read *her* mind. "He's the reason I wanted to reach her in the first place."

"What do you mean?" Hopper asked, his heavy brows furrowing.

"Brenner knew what potential Eleven has. Brenner has always wanted a perfect weapon. A child he could groom, mold into the perfect weapon. It was his ego." She paused and drank from her own coffee to give herself something to do. "When I left, I'm afraid I left him wanting for another to take my place. Eleven would have been very young when I left—they had segregated us by this point. I feel… slightly responsible for the obsession he's formed. Maybe if I had stayed, if I had allowed him to use me for his ends, I…" Erin caught herself, feeling her face color bright red.

She could feel Hopper's eyes boring into her. What had she meant by that?

"In any case," Erin said, forging ahead. "He's not dead, but he's not in charge of MKUltra. But I know him. I know his obsession. He'll find some way to come back for her. And I won't let him."

Hopper nodded. He could appreciate her motives.

"Ok," he said. Erin looked up at him hopefully. "I'll ask her. But it's her decision to make."

Erin nodded. She stifled a yawn, and stretched slightly. Looking at the clock, it now read 4:01 AM, and Erin groaned.

"I agree," Hopper said, grabbing Erin's mug, and taking it to the counter. "You can take care of this tomorrow."

With a few tasks to complete, Erin had quickly closed up the diner,

and made her way to Hopper's car with Hawkins Police Department emblazoned on the side.

Hopper stepped ahead of Erin, and opened her door for her. The gesture surprised her, and she looked at Hopper, evaluating him. The temptation to reach out and grab his hand to forge a solid psychic connection was strong. Erin had a hard time figuring out the enigmatic police chief. Was he this intense with everyone, or just strangers in his small town?

But Erin wasn't stupid. The way he sometimes looked down at her stirred something in her, something that previously only stirred with one other person. She'd convinced herself those feelings were wrong, so when she felt the stirrings of a flirtation with another man, her initial reaction was to pull away.

But this late, probably one too many beers into the early morning, Erin couldn't help herself. She felt Hopper's emotions, so close to her in proximity they might as well have been touching. The things he felt, despite their relative strangeness to each other, were enough to make her blush.

So there she stood, looking up at Hopper, who looked down at her with a discerning but confused look. Erin broke the spell between them, and she inhaled sharply before looking to the inside of the truck, helping herself up into the seat. Hopper closed the door for her, and slid in on the other side, starting up the engine.

They rode in absolute silence. So much had passed between them, so much new information needed to be digested, that they both had reached their threshold for talk. When Hopper rolled up to her driveway, they sat in the truck as it stalled.

"Let me know what she says," Erin said, her hand already on the handle of the door. "We'll go from there."

Hopper nodded. "I'll wait until you're in safely."

This made Erin laugh lightly. His concern struck her as sweet, but she hadn't the heart to tell him she could have burned an entire house down with just a look. "Thank you, Hopper," Erin said. She walked

tiredly to her front door, and looked back at him one last time before disappearing through her darkened front door.

5. Close to the Vest

“You don’t have to if you don’t want to,” Hopper said, drumming his fingers on his knee nervously.

Eleven was struggling with her Eggo, her preferred method of eating it being by hand. Still, manners were manners, and the Hopper family was going to do things the right way.

“I said I want to,” she said, and stuffed a third of an Eggo into her mouth.

Hopper sighed. Part of him was hoping she might say no. He wouldn’t have to take Eleven to Erin then. And being around her got to him. Like an itch he couldn’t locate, and unless he could scratch it, he would just as soon ignore it.

“I just mean… I don’t want you to think that I want you to do it. I don’t want to resemble him in any way,” Hopper said. Eleven knew who ‘he’ was. Brenner.

“I know,” Eleven said, after swallowing her Eggo. She washed it down with a huge gulp of milk.

“You wouldn’t have to chug your milk like that if you just chewed, instead of inhaling it,” Hopper said with a wry humor.

Eleven shook her head, and stuffed more Eggo into her mouth, making a display of it. This drew a laugh from Hopper.

“Come on, kid,” he said, grabbing his keys. “Your friends are waiting.”

Eleven stuffed the rest of her Eggo into her mouth, and bolted up out of her chair, heading for the door.

“Ah-ah!” Hopper said. “Dishes…”

Eleven rolled her eyes, and went back to the kitchenette table to grab her plate and put it in the sink. Now that they were living in a real house, not just Hopper’s cabin, Hopper insisted on keeping the house

in neat order.

Eleven was to spend the day at the Wheelers' house, as all the "party" usually did in the summer. When Hopper got off duty, he would take Eleven to meet Erin.

The thought of that made him jumpy and nervous.

With Eleven dropped off, Hopper settled into his morning routine at the police station, looking over messages, drinking coffee and shooting the shit with his officers.

"So Chief, you wanna tell us anything?" Calvin asked, his hands behind his head, reclining in his chair at his desk.

Hopper's stomach lurched a moment. He had kept his officers and Flo ignorant of everything that had happened, and he had no reason to believe they had caught on to anything, but still. He worried. He had to with Eleven now depending on him.

"No," Hopper said slowly, looking from Calvin to Phil, whose expression bordered on crestfallen.

"Oh come on," Calvin said, "new girl comes to town. Not hard to look at. And you just casually wait outside her diner all evening last weekend." Calvin shot him an I'm-not-buying-your-bullshit look.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Hopper said, drinking from his coffee. "It's not what you think," he added, owning up to it. At least a little.

"Oh, and why else would you wait outside her diner *all night*?" Calvin chuckled. He looked over at Phil, who hadn't spoken a word. "Sorry kiddo, you never stood a chance."

"Hey," Hopper said, not too aggressively, "she had some concerns about the diner. Worried about break-ins and such. So I stayed behind to talk."

"Okay, *even if* we believe you," Calvin said, setting his coffee down, "Okay, never mind, we don't believe you…"

Phil sighed. “Look, Chief, it’s fine, you know, she didn’t seem to enthusiastic when I asked her out, so it’s no big deal.”

“You asked?” Hopper said, incredulous. He realized then how brash it came across. “I mean… she didn’t want to go out with you?”

Phil pushed his glasses further up her nose. “Yeah I mean, she said she’s new to town and all, and didn’t want to get involved with anyone yet.”

“Well see, there you go,” Hopper said, glad there was some kind of an ending to this discussion, but something in him was a little disappointed at her answer.

Flo, however, did not feel that was the end of the discussion. She sat at her desk, typing away on her electric typewriter, and scoffed loudly.

“Hah!” she said, and continued to chuckle quietly to herself.

“What?” Hopper asked, on his last nerve.

“Not interested, when she’s got Tall, Brooding and Handsome sticking around her diner past closing?” She said, not looking up from her work. “None of you boys know a damn thing about women.”

And tacitly, the four of them knew the discussion was over.

Twigs snapped and settled beneath Hopper’s feet as he made his way up to his family cabin. He trailed several feet behind Eleven, who was eager to see the cabin again. Since they had cleaned it and closed it for the summer, they had not been back. Eleven said she missed living there. Hopper did too, if he was being honest. He thought vaguely it wasn’t the cabin he missed though

“She knows where it is?” she asked once she had summited the porch steps.

Hopper nodded, sitting beside Eleven on the steps. He set the fire extinguisher down between his legs.

“Why here?” Eleven asked, looking down at the extinguisher.

Hopper sighed. He had told her not to ask questions until they were there. She had upheld her end of the bargain.

“She wanted somewhere safe, somewhere no one would see,” Hopper looked out amongst the mixed deciduous and coniferous trees. It was in the dead of summer, and he could barely see through the thick of it. It was so different than in the winter. Years ago, when Sarah had been alive, and when he was still a married man, he came up here to hunt. That seemed like a hundred years ago now.

“And that?” Eleven looked down between Hopper’s legs.

Hopper looked at it too. “She said to bring it.”

Eleven’s excitement was clear. She fidgeted, and looked around the cabin, looking for movement.

When they had been sitting there long enough, and Hopper thought Erin wouldn’t come, he heard her steps coming from the same direction they had come. She stepped out from behind a large thicket of pines, and smiled at Hopper and Eleven.

Hopper stood and walked down the porch steps to greet her. Eleven followed timidly.

“Hi, Eleven,” Erin said quietly, tucking her hands into the back pockets of her jeans. She smiled. “I’m really glad you agreed to meet me.”

Eleven was silent.

Hopper looked down at Eleven and nudged her with his elbow.

Eleven opened her mouth like a fish, looking for something to say. “My dad said… you could help me?”

Erin nodded, somewhat sadly. The three of them were silent until Erin pulled her watch off her wrist, showing Erin her tattoo. Eleven unconsciously crossed her arms, pressing her own tattoo into her stomach. Erin gave a half smile, and secured her watch again.

“Can we sit and talk first?” Erin asked, looking up at Hopper.

He nodded. “We closed the place up when we moved to town, but we can go in,” he said, and led the other two back up the steps. He grabbed the fire extinguisher as he headed through the door.

It took Erin’s eyes a moment to adjust, but when they did, she smiled at the small but quaint cabin. Most of the furniture had been covered in sheets, but Erin could see that it was your quintessential hunting camp with shoulder-mounted bucks on the wall, an old couch, and an old record collection.

Hopper took the sheet off the small kitchen table where he and Eleven had shared so many meals, him teaching her small things that he hadn’t even thought of before Eleven came along. Like how to read a watch, or how to explain what latitude and longitude were.

Hopper stepped back, and pulled two chairs out for them. He took a few steps away from the table, and leaned against the kitchen cabinets.

Erin sat across from Eleven, and took a few bracing breaths. She looked at Hopper, and adjusted her long braid, draping it over one of her shoulders. He looked down at his shoes, and by the time he was able to look up at her again, she had turned her attention back to Eleven.

“First, I have to ask you… as a point of pride, I will not call you a name you don’t want me to call you. I know that everyone in Hawkins who didn’t know you before, has been calling you Jane. That’s the name your mother gave you.” Her eyes flicked to Hopper a second. “Do you want me to call you Eleven, or Jane?”

“Eleven,” she said. For a second, she sounded unsure.

Erin nodded. Able to pick up on her hesitation, Erin told her it was okay.

“Jillian doesn’t really care if we call her Jillian, nor does Tabor. They were at the lab too—I know Hopper has told you about why they’re with me. But I’m different from you and the others, Eleven, because I

didn't come to Hawkins Lab until I was eight years old. I had a life that I remember. So don't feel self-conscious about me calling you Eleven."

Erin could feel Hopper's surprise at the small fact about her life before Hawkins. Still, she pushed past it.

"Now. Your dad has told me all about what you can do. What happened here, how you opened the Upside Down, and how you closed it."

Eleven picked at a seam on her shorts, listening.

"I have known about the Upside Down my whole life. I didn't think it was real until you opened it. You're very powerful, Eleven. But unless I help you control those powers, those nose bleeds are going to hurt you in the long run."

Eleven's eyes widened.

"Don't be scared," Erin said, putting her hands on the table. "I've helped Jillian and Tabor. You'll meet them soon… They don't get them anymore. And neither do I, unless I use too much of my gift."

"How do you stop them?" Eleven asked, eagerness behind her voice.

"It will take time. And until you have control, it's best you only use your power if you need to. You think you can do that?"

Eleven nodded.

"Good," Erin said. "The first thing is going to sound silly. Have you ever been out playing with your friends before, and you've been running so hard your lungs hurt?"

Eleven shook her head. The boys didn't do a whole lot of running. But they rode their bikes.

"We ride bikes," Eleven said.

Erin nodded. "They probably changed the training from the time I was there, to the time you were. They had me training physically. I

think that gave me an advantage. In order for your body to keep up with what your mind is doing, you've gotta keep your body in top form. That means keeping oxygen moving to your brain by running, making your heart beat really fast. You know what I mean?"

Eleven nodded. "I run every day. If it's okay with your dad, I'll take you with me, and we can start you out that way. Jillian does those silly exercise videos, and Tabor does swimming. It's really going to be your personal preference, Eleven. What would you like to try first?"

Eleven looked back at Hopper, who nodded. "Um… running."

Erin smiled and winked. "I was hoping you'd say that. There's more to it than just being physically fit, but that will come later. What do you say we go outside and see what we're working with, huh?"

Erin stood, and waited for Eleven to follow. When they were outside, Erin looked around at her surroundings as if in contemplation. Hopper sat on the porch steps, trying to be as out-of-the-picture as possible, but still watching Eleven like a hawk.

"Ah!" Erin said, and walked towards the stacked firewood in an open-sided shed. She grabbed a few logs, and handed them to Eleven before grabbing two more herself.

"Just set them down over here," Erin said, and set them down about a foot apart from each other. She backed up, and Eleven followed her. They stood fifteen feet away, and Eleven looked back at Hopper unsurely. He nodded reassurance.

"Ok, Eleven, I'm going to take your hand, and I want you to show me a little of what you can do, using those logs out there," she said, looking down at the young girl

"Hold my hand?" Eleven asked.

"It's one of my gifts, it will help me see how I can help you not get the nose bleeds," Erin said. "Don't turn the juice all the way up though. Just a little.

Eleven took Erin's offered hand, and looked out at the logs, which she lifted with her mind, stacking them neatly.

Erin looked at Eleven, and saw no nose bleed. “Good,” she said, and looked back at Hopper a moment. “Do you bleed when you do small things at all?”

“Not anymore,” Eleven said. “If I do big things after, yes,” she said.

Erin nodded. “Okay, you know that sort of block you feel when you’re doing something harder? Like a pinch between your eyes?”

Eleven nodded.

“We want that pinch to come less and less the more you strain yourself. When I you’re your hand, I can feel the pain that you feel in your mind, which means the nosebleed is coming. We’re going to start running, and we’re going to see how far we can get in training before there are no more nosebleeds.”

“Is that all?” Eleven asked. Erin let her hand go, and chuckled a bit.

“No,” she said, “but we’ll get to the other stuff soon.”

Eleven pulled her lip in a bit. “So you can feel my pain? What else can you do?”

Erin walked over to the neat stack of logs that Eleven had made. She crouched a few feet from it, resting her arm on one of her knees.

“I can read minds, sense emotions from across a room, and feel someone’s pain. I can do one of these things, or all of these things at once. I can tell someone to do something, and they have to do it, but only for a moment. Power of persuasion…”

Erin looked down at the firewood, and closed her eyes. She felt the rush of warmth through her body, and heard the whoosh of the fire. When she opened her eyes, a small campfire had started at her feet.

“See?” Erin said, smiling. “No blood.” She stood, and walked to Hopper on the porch steps. His mouth was open slightly, and when Erin’s eyes met his, he closed it. She held her hand out, indicating for the fire extinguisher. When she had sprayed it out, she put it down at the bottom step.

“So what do you say? Start tomorrow?” Erin asked, as if she were offering to show Eleven how to bake cookies.

Eleven looked over at Hopper, and nodded. “Please dad,” she said, and that was that.

Heading out of the woods, Eleven led the way, leaving Erin and Hopper to walk together in silence. He stuffed his hands in his pockets, without something to carry back to his Bronco with him (Erin had told him to leave the extinguisher just in case).

“You left out a few things when you told me what you could do,” Hopper said finally, breaking the silence.

Erin smiled and sighed, looking straight ahead through the woods. “You tried to run out of my diner when I read your mind. Somehow I didn’t think you needed to hear the rest of it.”

“Then it’s a good thing you’re trying to help her,” Hopper said. “She needs someone strong like you.”

“You’re strong,” Erin said honestly. She had seen his mind briefly, but it was enough to know what kind of man he was. “She has you.”

Their eyes met as they walked. “You know what I mean,” he said.

“I’m still only human, Hopper,” Erin said. “I have weakness in me too.”

“None that I can see,” he said. “That’s a compliment, not a challenge,” he added.

They walked on in silence some more.

“He wouldn’t have let you go easily,” Hopper said suddenly, surprising Erin. Her stomach lurched. “Would he?”

Erin’s face flushed. He didn’t have to say Brenner’s name to know that’s who ‘he’ was. “No,” she said, not daring to look Hopper in the eye.

“He’s tried once already?” Hopper asked, not wishing to treat her like

a suspect. It was so easy for him to revert to cop-Hopper when he was trying to be dad-Hopper.

“Yes,” Erin said, her brow furrowing sadly, her eyes still pointed to the forest floor.

“And he’s going to try again,” Hopper said, stopping. Erin stopped, and finally met Hopper’s eyes. “For both of you.”

Erin nodded. “I told you he would.”

“You haven’t told me everything,” Hopper stated. It wasn’t a question.

She shook her head.

“You’re going to tell me if this is going to go any further with my daughter. I need to know what I’m dealing with when it comes to him,” he said, and for the first time, he saw real fear in Erin’s grey eyes.

She took a shuddering breath. He felt a pang of regret for speaking to her that way. He thought he might have imagined it, but he thought her lip quivered.

She drew it into her mouth, and nodded, looking down at Hopper’s shoes. “I know. I will tell you, but… I need some time. There’s… a lot. It’s complicated. But I still want to start teaching Eleven.”

Hopper sighed. “Fair enough.”

Notes for the Chapter:

> I am SO SORRY for the delay in publishing! Things have been crazy for me. I got the promotion/new position I was working for at my job, and I have started my training for it. And then Thanksgiving happened. But it was good to take a break and sort of plot out the next few chapters, so things should be picking up soon! Please let me know what you think!

6. That's How Strong My Love Is

Jillian nervously hiked her backpack up her shoulder as she walked into the halls of Hawkins High School. Even after living in Hawkins for almost two months now, she hadn't made any friends. Not to mention that, but she had never actually been to school before.

She clutched her class schedule in her hand so long and so hard that she was sure it would fall apart in a pulpy mess. She looked down, trying to ignore her shaking hand as she found her first period class and its associated classroom.

"You look lost," a voice said, drawing Jillian from her reverie.

She turned around and was met by a moderately tall boy, with long hair and an earring. Her teenaged sensibilities kicked into high gear, and she felt her face flush.

"Yeah," she said, looking down at the schedule. "That obvious, huh?"

He smiled cockily, and took the paper from her hand. "Let's see," he said, looking over her schedule. "We've got first and third period together. Come on, I'll show you where you're going."

"Thank you," Jillian said, awash in relief.

"I was the new kid last year myself, I know the feeling," he said as they walked side by side down the hallway. Jillian heard resentment in his voice, but didn't pry.

"So you work at Benny's," he said, looking over at her, his eyes trailing downwards and back up.

"Yeah," she said. "My sister owns it."

"Cool, cool," he said dismissively. "So listen, are you working after school today?"

Jillian tucked her brown, shoulder length hair behind her ear. "Uh… yeah. Why?"

He stopped walking, and looked down at her like a predator, a smirk on his face. “I thought we could go somewhere. I can show you what little there is to see in this hellhole.”

Jillian thrilled at the way he looked down at her, his blue eyes clear.

She stammered, and laughed a bit. “I don’t even know your name.”

He smiled, and joined her laughter. “Oh yeah… Billy Hutcherson.”

“I’m Jillian Pearson.”

“Well, Jillian Pearson…” he said, biting his lip lightly. “You wanna go drive around town after school today?”

“I really shouldn’t, my sister would kill me,” she said.

“Just call and tell her you’re not feeling well,” Billy said, dismissively, as if it were nothing to lie to Erin.

Jillian was silent, frozen there, backed up to a locker.

“I promise I’ll take you home before dark,” he said. He flashed his most winning half smirk, the one he knew girls swooned over.

She softened a bit. She always was a sucker for a nice smile.

If I was the sun way up there
I'd go with love most everywhere
I'll be the moon when the sun goes down
Just to let you know that I'm still around

Otis Redding’s voice carried through Benny’s as Erin and Tabor wiped down each table before closing. *That’s How Strong My Love Is* was one song Erin could never get enough of.

When the song ended, she reached behind the jukebox and unplugged it. She sighed, and smoothed her apron over her jeans. Tabor and Erin had worked a little harder since Jillian had stayed

home sick this evening.

By the time she pulled the key out of her Saab in the driveway of her small, rented townhome, Erin knew she wouldn't be long for bed. Such was the way when you owned and operated a diner. She was starting to regret her decision to use Benny's as a cover in Hawkins.

She opened the front door and called out to Jillian.

"Jillie, we're home," she said, throwing her keys and purse onto a nearby console table.

Tabor kicked off his shoes, and headed straight for the kitchen, where he opened a beer. Erin pulled her watch off, and flexed her wrist. She made her way down the hallway to knock on Jillian's door.

"Knock knock," she said gently, tapping the door with a few fingernails. She opened the door to a completely pitch dark room. When she switched the light on, Jillian's bed was empty, and her stomach fell.

"Jillian," she called out, making for Tabor's room, and then her own. She was in neither place. She went out to the living room, where Tabor had already kicked his feet up onto the coffee table.

"Jillian's not home," she said, trying to remain calm.

"Sure she is," he said, mussing up his sandy hair. "Said she was sick. She not in her room?"

Erin shook her head, and suppressed the sick feeling in her stomach.

"Go walk the neighborhood a bit—maybe she's out?" Erin suggested, and Tabor nodded. He jumped into action, and flew out the door.

She stood frozen, trying to think of what other logical places Jillian might be. The back yard had an old swing set, but by the time Erin had gone out there in the dusky light, she had already decided she wasn't anywhere to be found.

Her heart hammered in her ears as she tried to think of what to do. Years of preparation in the lab could not have prepared her for the

sick feeling of a missing child.

She walked inside, and picked up the phone. She took a steading breath, and dialed 911 on the rotary phone, but before the phone could start ringing, she pressed her finger down on the receiver. No police. Not yet. But she needed to find her.

Of course the answer was there, but she hated to reveal her ineptitude to Hopper. Still, he was the only one in town who knew who Erin and her "siblings" were, so he was the best choice. Setting aside her pride, she dialed Hopper's number. It rang four times before Eleven picked up the phone.

"Hopper residence, Jane speaking," Eleven said. Hopper had taught her how to answer the phone properly, but she still sounded rigid.

"It's me, Eleven, it's Erin," she said, trying to sound calm. "Can you put your dad on please?"

Silence on the other end. Erin heard muffled voices, and a moment later, Jim picked up.

"Erin?" he said. "Everything okay?"

"No, Hopper," Erin said, her voice wavering a bit. "Jillian's missing. She told me she was sick, and didn't come to work after school."

"You call the station yet?" Hopper asked.

"No," she said. "I didn't want to go that far yet."

"Good," he said. "I've got to get Eleven over to the Wheelers' for the night, but I'm coming over, okay?"

"Okay," Erin said, and they hung up.

For nearly a half an hour, Erin sat soberly in the living room, trying to keep her mind blank, and not run over the possibilities. Erin, kidnapped, taken by MKUltra, or Brenner, or both, or some other entity that wanted to use her like a weapon. Or she had run away. Or she had been snatched like so many young people were these days.

Light flashed in the front windows, and Hopper parked his Bronco. Erin opened the door, stepping aside so he could come in. In a surprising gesture, Hopper put his hands on Erin's shoulders.

"It's okay," he said. "I'm here, okay?"

Erin nodded. She was sure she looked like a madwoman, but in this moment, she didn't care.

"Start at the beginning," he said, steering her to the couch, where he sat next to her. "Start from this morning, and tell me everything you remember, and don't skip over even the most mundane details."

Erin swallowed, and started from the beginning.

Erin was starting to get to know the inside of a police vehicle very well. How many times had Jim Hopper taken her somewhere in the Bronco? It was a form of familiarity they had been working towards all summer. Yet right now, Erin's mind was anywhere but her ambiguous feelings towards Jim Hopper

With Tabor waiting at home in case Jillian returned before Jim and Erin did, Hopper and Erin rode around town, driving by common teenaged hangouts. They hit up the arcade, the movies, and even lover's lane.

Erin groaned when Hopper told her he was taking her to look at lover's lane. Was this what being a sort-of parent to a teenager was like?

"Don't worry, Erin," Hopper said, putting his hand on her leg reassuringly as he drove away from lover's lane. "There's a few more spots she could be."

And sure enough, as Jim pulled into the park, two figures sat on the bars of the metal merry-go-round. The headlights shone on them, and they shielded their eyes until Hopper shut off the Bronco, and Hopper and Erin stepped out.

Erin moved faster than Hopper, her eyes blazing.

“Jillian!” she shouted. “Do you have *any* idea how worried I was?”

Jillian blanched, the face of someone who knew they screwed up.

“I just lost track of time,” she stammered. “I’m sorry.”

“No, what you did was *lie* to me,” Erin said. Hopper stopped at Erin’s shoulder, putting his hand on it reassuringly.

“It’s no big deal,” the boy with Jillian said, puffing his chest out, and stepping off the playground equipment. “Chill out, lady.”

“Chill out?” Erin said, laughing. Erin marched right up to the unnamed boy, and grabbed him by the wrist.

“The fuck?” he said, trying to wrench his hand way from Erin, but she held tight with a strength that surprised the teenaged boy.

“Shut up, get in your car, and drive away *now*,” Erin said, turning her persuasion powers up to their full capacity.

He complied, and before he had driven away, Erin pointed at Hopper’s Bronco. “Get in. *Now*.”

Jillian hung her head, and got in before Hopper or Erin could. Erin turned to walk to the Bronco, but Hopper grabbed her by the arm, stopping her.

Erin stood there in the dusky light, looking at Hopper’s chest with a simmering rage that almost frightened him.

“Hey,” he said, putting his hands on her arms to steady her, finding that she was shaking.

She looked up at him, and wiped away the blood from her nose with the back of a finger.

“Take a deep breath, okay?” he said, rubbing at her arms. “In, and out.”

Erin watched as Hopper showed her how to breathe, and for a moment, held onto her anger, but crumbled, and complied. After a

few steadying breaths, she nodded.

“You’ve got all the time in the world to chew her out about this,” he said. “I have a feeling she’s not going to make that same mistake again. But this is what kids do.”

“Yeah, well I wouldn’t know…” Erin said, referring to her stolen youth.

Hopper drove the two of them home, and listened to Erin lecture Jillian on staying out late, lying, being out on a school night, boys, and the risks of being sexually active. Hopper’s ears went red, but he said nothing. She really was trying to cram years worth of parenting into one lecture, wasn’t she?

“You’re grounded for two weeks,” Erin said as they pulled up in front of the townhouse.

“Two weeks?” Jillian countered. “You’re not my mother, Erin.”

“You’re right, I’m not,” Erin said. “But someone’s gotta take the job.”

Jillian huffed, and the two of them got out of the Bronco. Jillian stalked off into the house, tearing the door open, and slamming it shut. Erin stood on her front lawn, seething.

“Hey,” Hopper said, leaning over the passenger’s seat. “Get in.”

Erin turned back in disbelief. “I’ve got to—“

“What, put the fear of god in her?” Hopper chuckled. “I think you did an okay job of that already. You said Tabor’s waiting—he’ll watch her. You need to cool off.”

Erin swept her hair back, and sighed. Hopper was right. She slid back into the Bronco, and rubbed at her temples as Hopper drove away.

7. Moonlight Truths

“Where are you taking me?” Erin asked, looking over at Hopper as they passed the darkened houses in Erin’s neighborhood.

“You’re gonna have to trust me, alright?” Hopper said, looking over at Erin, shooting her a reproachful but comforting look.

Erin huffed, and stared out the window. Her heart rate was still elevated, and eventually she noticed that her jaw was clenched tightly. She consciously relaxed her muscles, and decided to take a few steadying breaths.

“I shouldn’t have left,” Erin argued, though weakly.

Hopper merely scoffed and shook his head. “I haven’t had a lot of time parenting a teenager, but I know when I’m beating a dead horse,” he said.

Erin didn’t argue, and for the rest of their trip, they were silent. Erin noticed that they were driving further and further out of town, towards Hopper’s cabin. Instead of taking the turn for Hopper’s cabin, though, Hopper kept driving. The woods were thick, and would have been dark if it weren’t for the fullness of the moon that night.

Hopper pulled into a gravel driveway, and parked.

“Where are we?” Erin asked, looking around.

Hopper exited the Bronco, and Erin followed.

“Trout Lake,” he said. “I used to come out here to fish.”

“Used to?” Erin asked. Hopper didn’t immediately reply, but walked through the wooded, gravel pathway that seemed to have no end.

“Yeah, I…” he said, putting his hands in his pockets. “I haven’t come out here for a long time.”

Erin was about to ask why, but felt the sadness coming off him, and knew that whatever it was, it was something he guarded dearly. She

could have pressed him, asked him to explain, but didn't have the heart for it tonight.

"There *is* a lake out here, right?" Erin asked. Before Hopper could answer, they came out the end of the trail, and Erin saw the small lake with its lonely fishing dock bathed in moonlight.

"Barely," he said with a wry smile. They walked to the edge of the lake, and down the fishing dock.

"Doesn't get a lot of traffic, does it?" Erin asked, looking at the shape of the dock.

Hopper braced himself on one of the support beams, and sunk down to sit near the edge.

"It's private property, so no," he said. He looked up at Erin, who still stood. She eyed him suspiciously.

"Is this *your* lake?" she asked.

Hopper nodded sheepishly, and fished a pack of his unfiltered cigarettes from his shirt pocket.

Erin sat next to him.

"It's part of the land. The cabin's off that way," Hopper pointed in an easterly direction.

"A man of many secrets," Erin said, ironically, taking a cigarette from the offered packet. Hopper lit it for her, and the two of them sat smoking for a moment.

Erin held the cigarette between her fingers, and pulled off her boots, which she tossed behind her. With a sigh, she inched forward on the dock, and dangled her feet into the water.

The coolness of the water seemed to take away a degree of her stress, which washed away with a sigh.

"I've never been scared like that before," Erin said, looking at the lit cigarette in her hand.

Hopper chuckled, and followed suit, taking his shoes off, and mimicking Erin's actions by putting his feet in the lake.

"Trained assassin and psychic spy or not, parenting a teenager is awful," Hopper said.

"Still," Erin said, stubbing the cigarette out, and leaving the butt of it politely on the dock. "I didn't expect that from her. Lying, and sneaking off to be with a boy."

"She's a teenager," Hopper reasoned. "She's going to start showing an interest in boys."

"You don't think I know that? I don't know if you remember, but I can pick up on emotions without even touching people most of the time. Teenagers are especially easy to read."

"Okay," Hopper said, "but it still doesn't explain why you went off the handle like that. I mean, Jillian has power of her own, so she can take care of herself against a little shit like Billy Hutcherson. What's got you so spooked?"

Erin scoffed and shook her head. "I suppose in my own selfish way I wanted her to have a few more years to her childhood."

Hopper breathed a heavy sigh.

"Still... it felt personal. What is it you're not telling me, Erin?"

Erin squeezed her eyes shut. "Do we have to have this conversation now?"

"I think we do," Hopper said. Erin made no reply. "Look," he continued, "I think you know I can handle it. I've handled a lot of shit these past few years."

Erin looked over at him, and shook her head. Her eyes shone in the moonlight, and Hopper could see she was fighting back tears.

"You don't get it," she said. "I— I'm so selfish. I know I have to tell

you, but I can't bear the thought of you looking at me any differently."

Hopper looked down at her, and swallowed. "I don't— I don't know..."

"Jim," Erin said. "I can feel it sometimes. I know there's more to this," she indicated the space between them, "than we are admitting."

Hopper scoffed and nodded. Fair enough.

"So you see, when I show you what I'm going to show you, you'll understand why I think your perception of me is going to change."

"Show?"

Erin nodded, and pulled her feet out of the water. She curled them up beside her, and she leaned forward into Hopper. She took the cigarette from his hands, and stubbed it out as well. He watched her with trepidation. She placed her hands lightly on either side of his face.

"I'll show you," she repeated. "But you have to clear your mind, or it will be harder for me to get in."

"*Get in*?" Hopper asked.

"I'll *show* you," she said, her breath catching in her chest. "I'll show you what it is I'm not telling you."

Understanding her meaning, Hopper nodded, and closed his eyes. For a moment, nothing happened. But soon, in his mind's eye, he saw foggy figures coming into focus. It was Erin, a few years younger, and Martin Brenner, the same as he remembered him…

... Sitting on a bed with Erin. The conversation, which Erin had replayed in her own mind time after time, played for Hopper.

"… there are things a man might want from you. Things that he might let slip a great deal of information to have. You can bring a man's guard down with the promise of these things," Brenner said.

Hopper felt his insides go cold. Still, Erin kept projecting the images into his mind.

Four cleared her throat, and looked at Brenner. "Wh-when… will we begin?"

He tipped her chin up with his knuckles, and caressed her chin with his thumb, as he had done hundreds of times before. He rose to leave, to let her think, and tilted her head up to face him. He leaned down, and placed a kiss on her lips, light and chaste, but so much different than any that came before.

"Not tonight."

Brenner and Erin's figures dissolved, and reappeared again at a later time. They were no longer in Erin's institutional, laboratory bedroom, but in a more modern-looking space. A bedroom with white walls, white marble floors, and a white linen bed. The room was spacious, and had many windows, which were darkened by the night, and were beaten by the rainstorm that raged outside.

Erin sat nervously on the bed, as if she were waiting for something. For someone. For him.

He came to stand in front of her, and put his hand on the side of her face. He put one knee beside her on the bed, and leaned over her, tilting her head up. He reached down and opened the gauzy robe she wore, exposing one of her breasts, caressing it reverently. He leaned his head down to hers. His lips met Erin's, and—

Hopper's heart rate went through the roof. His eyes shot open, and their link was severed.

"That sick fucking—"

"Shhh," Erin said, using her power of persuasion. "Wait. Keep your mind open."

Hopper had no choice but to comply. He closed his eyes and—

Erin was soaking wet and fully clothed, years older. She was pressed against a door, Brenner pinning her.

His lips were inches from hers. Her features showed pure disgust mixed with equal parts sadness.

"Everything I did for you, I did to prepare you for our work. You were part of something that was bigger than what your life would have been. You can still be a part of that."

"I'd rather rot in hell," she said.

"We need you," he said. "One of our subjects has such raw potential, she reminds me of you. But she doesn't have the control you have. She needs someone like you. A mentor. Come back," he caressed her cheek with his thumb.

"And help you train another instrument of death? Help you rob a child of her innocence? Or are you no longer giving that lesson to your assets?" She was silent a moment as she searched his eyes. "Was I just an exception… papa?"

"You were my *exception," he said.*

Erin put her hands down, severing their connection, and Hopper faltered a moment, leaning forward in exhaustion. When he opened his eyes, Erin was wiping her bloodied nose with the back of her plaid button down shirt.

"I'm sorry I did that to you," she said. "But you needed to see all of it. When he approached me two years ago. Just before all of this started in Hawkins."

"So you were right," she continued. "He'll want me back, but for different reasons than he wants Eleven back. But you understand now why I won't ever let him get to her."

Hopper said nothing, but his jaw clenched, and his fists flexed. For a moment, Erin was scared that he was angry with her. Or disgusted. Or both.

"And now you're looking at me just the way I was afraid you would," Erin said in sad defeat.

She looked down at the water of the lake, though it was bathed in

moonlight, it appeared black. She could have easily disappeared under it at that moment.

“If I ever see that psychopath again, I’ll kill him,” Hopper said. Erin could feel his anger quaking off him. She knew he meant it.

She looked back in surprise.

“What he did to you,” he said. He opened his mouth a moment, looking for the words. He took her hand in his, startling her. “It’s not your fault. I’m sorry he did that to you.”

Erin gave a shuddering sigh of relief, but her face contorted in denial. She found herself rambling. “I was so young, Hopper. I mean, eighteen, but what eighteen-year-old is really an adult? I… I could show you more, but… In the end, I found myself under his spell in a way. Isn’t that sad? A psychic weapon, and I was under *his* spell. All that I am, and I still couldn’t help but form… feelings.”

A tear fell from Erin’s eye, and she quickly batted it away, surprised by its presence. “And the sad part is, Hopper… None of that compared to the fear I have had at telling you about it.”

“Why?” Hopper asked, his face honest. He gripped her hand tighter.

“I’m not fool enough to think you’ll still look at me the same way,” she said quietly.

Hopper flexed his jaw a moment, torn.

“Read my mind,” he said, turning her hand over, reestablishing their physical contact.

“No, Hopper,” she said, sniffling slightly, trying to keep her composure. “I won’t do that to you.”

“Please,” Hopper said, surprising Erin. Her heart raced at the implication of him volunteering his thoughts.

Tentatively, she looked down at his hand holding hers. She closed her eyes, and in a second she saw the thoughts he was clearly projecting to her.

Erin leaned against his Bronco with messy, sweaty hair, and Erin could feel that in that moment, Hopper wanted her. The image flashed forward, and they were in the kitchenette of the cabin. Erin held Eleven's hand across the table, displaying a level of protectiveness that made Hopper swell with admiration.

Erin saw the police station, and the friendly banter that passed between Hopper and his officers. An older woman's voice came out clear as day, "Not interested, when she's got Tall, Brooding and Handsome sticking around her diner past closing?" She said, not looking up from her work. "None of you boys know a damn thing about women."

And finally, an image that made Erin's chest flutter—an out-of-focus image, a fantasy—of Hopper leaning down to kiss Erin, pulling her to him and picking her up, wrapping her legs around him. This was what Hopper imagined when he laid in bed at night.

Erin startled, and broke their contact before the fantasy could go any further. They both sat there, at the edge of the dock, staring into each other's eyes, surprised, but also somewhat relieved.

"See… neither of us is very good at saying things out loud," Hopper said.

Erin's breath came raggedly. She knew Hopper felt for her, but she had been so willfully blind to it, ignoring it in case it ever went away. But now, there it was. She had shown him her shameful secret, and he still wanted her.

She reached forward, and pressed her hand against his beard. She caressed his cheek with her thumb a moment, and he touched her outstretched arm.

On impulse, Hopper pulled Erin's arm toward him, pulling her into him. She let out a small, surprised cry. She steadied herself with her arms around Hopper's shoulders. The space between them seemed to crackle with electricity. Hopper put his arms around Erin's waist, and the two of them kissed, as easily as if they were two puzzle pieces clicking into place.

His beard tickled her chin, and she marveled at how he kissed her

softer than she thought he would. He kissed her with a gentle urgency she hadn't expected, but it somehow put her at ease.

Hopper pulled away from Erin, breaking their kiss, and looked at Erin with wonder and appreciation. He kept his arms around her, and she held onto his shoulders.

Words hung on their lips, and the two of them struggled to say anything. Instead, Erin settled for smiling, and planting a small kiss on Hopper's lips. When she shivered in the night air, Hopper pulled back from her, almost eager to talk about anything but what was happening at that moment.

"Are you cold?" he asked.

Though it was late summer, August, in Indiana, Erin still shook slightly. She wasn't sure if it was from the air, or from her nervousness.

"Um," Erin said, looking down at herself. "A bit… I guess. It's okay though."

"I've got something in the truck," he said. "We keep a blanket in all the vehicles on the force."

"It's okay, Hopper, really," Erin said, watching as Hopper rose quickly to his feet, her words dying in her mouth as Hopper walked barefoot down the dock towards the trail.

"I'll be right back," he said, and put a little speed in his step.

When he had disappeared through the trees, Erin sat there a moment, paralyzed by the fear of what might happen.

The sound of the crickets seemed deafening as Erin looked down at the placid, black water of Trout Lake. She had been trained on how to seduce men, but had only ever been with one man. She escaped before the program could utilize her full range of skills.

How would Hopper compare to Brenner? Would he touch her softer, or harder, or slower, or any other variation she could possibly imagine?

She didn't have enough time to ruminate on the thought before Hopper returned with a blanket over his arm. He sat next to Erin, and draped it over her shoulders.

"Thank you," she said. She looked out at the lake's glassy surface. "It's really beautiful here. Why don't you come out here anymore?"

"After my divorce, and with Sarah gone, I just… it was easier to bury every part of my past that reminded me of them."

"Sarah?" Erin asked.

"Yeah," Hopper started, reluctantly. "My little girl."

Erin's eyes took on a distant quality. On the edge of some of the thoughts she had read from Hopper, she had detected loss. She somehow thought that she could picture this little girl, but had never actually seen her.

"I'm sorry, Hopper," Erin said. She took his hand, running her thumb over the top of his hand. "I always felt the loss in your thoughts. You feel so much, but show none of it," she said, and the two of them finally made eye contact.

In a comforting gesture, Erin laced her fingers in Hopper's. He looked down at their hands clasped together, and brought Erin's hand up to kiss the back of it. When he had finished, Erin put the hand on his beard, running her thumb over his scruff.

Hopper leaned forward and kissed her again. Erin responded by wrapping her arms around his neck again, and found themselves picking up where they had left off.

Hopper deepened their kiss and ran his tongue along hers in an exploratory way. She sighed, and let him guide her. He reached up behind her, lacing his fingers through her long hair.

Erin made a small noise, and pulled herself onto Hopper's lap, straddling his hips. He supported her lower back, and pressed his hands into her as she leaned down to kiss him. She snaked her fingers into his hair, and kissed him harder, until Hopper pulled back.

“Wait, wait,” he said, pulling away from Erin’s lips. “Erin…”

“What?” she said, looking down at him, her pupils dilated.

“Let’s just slow down, okay?” he said, putting his hands further up her hips, resting them on her waist, kneading her stomach lightly through the flannel fabric of her shirt.

“Did I do something wrong, or…?”

“No,” Hopper said, a little louder than he intended. His eyes shot open completely. “God, no. I just… I don’t want to take advantage.”

Erin blinked, and sat back on Hopper’s thighs, meeting him at eye level. She searched his face for meaning.

“I just mean, I don’t want… to be anything like *him*.”

Erin’s eyes widened, and she looked at Jim Hopper with a new sense of appreciation.

“You could *never* be like him,” she said, trying to convey sincerity through her tone.

Hopper swallowed, and looked over Erin’s shoulder at an unfixed point. “I never want to be cruel to Eleven the way he was… and I never want to take advantage of you the way he did.”

Erin lightly traced her fingers over Hopper’s hair, smoothing it back the way he styled it, before resting her hands on his neck gently. “It’s not taking advantage if it’s what I want to do.”

Hopper shook his head. “Still,” he said. “I want to do this right with you. I haven’t done a lot of things right in the last several years, but I’ve been trying to make up for that.”

Erin nodded in understanding. Hopper sighed, and held onto Erin tighter. She leaned into him, resting her forehead on his.

“So how do you plan on doing right by me?” Erin asked with a sweet smile.

Hopper put a hand on Erin’s cheek, and traced the bottom of her lip with his thumb before kissing her gently.

“You’ll see.”

Notes for the Chapter:

> The chapter we have all been waiting for! I really wanted to get this one right. I wrote and rewrote the second half of this chapter because what I had come up with just didn't feel "right". THIS is what I feel rings the most true. I hope you all enjoy what I've come up with! Please let me know what you think, as I heartily enjoy hearing your thoughts and comments.

8. Currents of Change

Notes for the Chapter:

> I apologize for the delay in posting this most recent chapter. Holidays, new job, yada yada. I had a half a chapter started but didn't know how to finish it, but your thoughtful and kind comments really helped keep the fire lit under this story. I'd like to try to finish sometime in January, but we'll see how that goes. I'll try to get a few more chapters in before New Year's! As always, comments are appreciated!

“That’s good!” Erin shouted, clasping her hands together in front of her face. “Yes, keep going!”

Eleven had stacked three fifty-five gallon barrels full of water already, creating a small pyramid, and still her nose had not started bleeding. She finished, and let go, panting slightly.

Erin put her hands on Eleven’s shoulders, and she turned to face Erin. Erin enveloped Eleven in an enthusiastic hug.

“You’re getting so good,” she said, and looked down at her pupil. Eleven looked up at her teacher in appreciation. Her affection for her in that moment swelled, and Erin nearly teared up.

“I feel the same way,” she whispered, and kissed the top of her head. Eleven smiled. She liked not having to say things out loud to Erin. It was so much easier this way for them.

“Now,” Erin said, pulling back, and walking Eleven over to the cabin porch stairs where Hopper waited for them, “when you get home, take a rest, and in the morning we’ll run the bleachers at the high school.”

“Okay,” Eleven said with a smile, as Hopper stood up and mussed her hair.

Erin and Hopper’s eyes met, and Erin felt her stomach flip.

Since their late night trip out to Trout Lake, this was the first time Erin had seen Hopper. Eleven's lessons had been scaled back since school started.

"Are we done for the day?" Hopper asked, looking from Eleven to Erin.

"Yes," Erin said, "I think it's best to end on a high note."

"Alright then," Hopper said, and the three of them started to make their way through the woods towards their cars.

Eleven ran ahead several paces, leaving Erin and Hopper to walk together, stepping gingerly over branches and forest floor debris.

"She's getting better," Erin said, pulling her braid over her shoulder and holding onto it with one hand. "Especially since she unlearned that 'anger equals power' nonsense. If I see Kali again, she'll get an earful from me. It's effective, but not very safe. Eleven is quite the student. She's learned faster than Tabor or Jillian ever did…"

Hopper chuckled. "You're cute when you're nervous."

Erin smiled and let out a breathy laugh. "I had hoped it wasn't so obvious."

"I don't want to make you nervous," he said, and Erin could tell he felt worried.

"It's not that kind of nervous," Erin said, stopping abruptly to look Hopper in the eyes.

Hopper nodded, and suppressed a smile. They resumed their pace.

"Good," he said. "Then maybe you'll still agree to come out to the neighborhood potluck on Sunday."

"Chief Hopper, are you asking me on a date?" Erin asked with mock surprise.

"Only if it's a yes," he said. They both knew the answer.

“Sure,” she said. “What’s the occasion though?”

“Labor Day,” Hopper said with a measure of surprise.

“Oh,” Erin said. “So um… Seeing as I’ve spent years on the run from an evil subset of the CIA, I’m going to ask you something you’ll probably think is a silly question, but—what does one typically bring to a Labor Day neighborhood potluck?”

Hopper nodded and pressed his lips together. Sometimes he forgot just how similar she and Eleven were in many regards.

“Well, for starters, nothing that can be considered healthy,” he said wryly. “I am fairly certain the neighborhood moms will have most of it covered.”

“Oh god, am I a neighborhood mom now?” Erin said with feigned concern.

Hopper looked sidelong at her. “Not like any neighborhood mom *I’ve* ever seen.”

Erin met his eyes and smiled.

“Tell you what,” he said. “I’ll tell Karen Wheeler to call you and you can work that out. And… bring Jillian and Tabor with you. I think it would be good for Eleven to get to know some others like her.”

“I will,” she said, just as they reached the edge of the woods, and walked out to their cars. Eleven was already waiting in the passenger seat of the Bronco.

They paused behind their cars, and Hopper looked down at her.

“So, how about you guys come over around noon?”

Erin nodded. “We’ll be there.”

The two shared a loaded silence, and Hopper looked into the back window of the Bronco. Eleven stared straight ahead, unconcerned with what Hopper and Erin were doing.

Taking the opportunity, Hopper stepped closer to Erin, and looked down at her. He tucked a bit of stray hair behind her ear, and leaned down, kissing her lightly. His lips lingered on hers.

He pulled away.

“See you in the morning when you pick up Eleven for the bleachers?”

Erin nodded. “Just what every teenager wants to wake up on a Saturday morning to do, right? You coming along this time?”

Hopper grumbled. He had been coming along on their runs sometimes. Eleven insisted he get into shape, and was losing the battle to her more and more.

“You and she both, you’re sadists, you know?” He said.

“Mmm,” Erin said, mulling it over, cocking her head to the side. “It’s for your own good.”

“Yeah, that’s what they say, but it doesn’t make it any more enjoyable,” he said, putting some space between them.

“So that means you’re coming,” Erin said, sure he would come.

They both paused before their car doors, and shared one last glance. Yeah. He’d be there.

In the desolate cold he waited.

He had been starving for so long. When he’d been in the boy, he had thrived. He had felt his roots spreading through their world, and with every day he grew stronger.

But since that girl had closed the gateway, he had been forced to wait. He lost everything he worked for. He tested every weak point into their world. They were all closed. It enraged him.

He could pound at the walls of their dimension, and send every one of his servants out on scouting missions, but nothing happened.

Until he felt her. The one he'd felt for years, who touched his mind and walked in his world as easily as going to sleep.

For years, she was distant, and her trips to his world were fleeting, far between. But now she was near. He could feel her.

He just had to find her. She was his way back in. He knew it.

"Oh, you know, just a pie or something," Karen Wheeler's voice said over the phone. "The men usually work the grill, and we do the rest.

"Okay," Erin said, still feeling nervous about Sunday's potluck. She fidgeted in her chair at the kitchenette table.

"I don't know if anyone's told you yet, but your pies are better than Benny's ever were," Karen confessed.

"Thank you Karen," Erin said. Suddenly she had a swelling of affection for Mrs. Wheeler.

"So we'll be happy to have you and your pie at the potluck," Karen said. "So, Hopper invited you to the potluck?"

Erin braced herself. She knew this might happen. She took a deep breath and tried to remain as impassive as possible.

"Yes," Erin said. "Jill, Tabor and I are eager to keep getting to know Hawkins."

"Mhmmm," Karen said, and Erin knew she wouldn't let it go. "So are you and Hopper a thing?"

"I'm afraid I don't know what you mean," Erin said.

"Oh, he's quite the catch," Karen said. "Even for someone as young as you."

Erin bit her tongue. She would not be baited. She would not give Karen Wheeler the gossip she so clearly craved.

"You're not wrong Karen," Erin said, putting on her sweetest waitress

voice. “Well, thank you for the information, I’ll be there Sunday with the pie.”

Erin hung up before Karen could say anything else.

Erin rubbed at her face and massaged her temple. Maybe it was that she was tired, or maybe it was that her conversation with Karen Wheeler took it out of her. She sighed, and ran her hand over her hair.

“Erin!” an insistent voice came.

Erin jumped, and looked up through bleary eyes. Tabor stood in front of her.

“Hmm?” she replied.

“I called your name like three times,” he said.

“Oh, sorry,” she said. “I just got off the phone with someone I’m pretty sure might be the CEO of the local rumor mill.”

“What?” Tabor said, confused.

“Nothing,” she said, and breathed in a sigh. “What’s up?”

“Just… wanted to know if I could take the Saab after work today?” he asked, holding the keys out in front of her. It was his turn to shut down the diner tonight.

“Yeah, sure,” she said, feeling suddenly like she needed a nap. “Where are you going?”

Tabor flushed, his ruddy complexion going even more red than normal. “I have a date,” he said.

Erin smirked, and put her head on her hand. “Good for you,” she said.

“I won’t be home too late,” he said, a concerned look on his face.

“You don’t have a curfew, Tabor,” she said. “You’re an adult.”

“I know, it’s just… after Jill pulled that stunt, I just… Don’t want to scare you.”

She gave a weak half smile and shook her head. “I trust you. Go and have fun.”

Tabor smiled and left. He was twenty-one, but still seemed so much younger than her sometimes. Even though she too was only twenty-six, she had been forced to grow up to care for Jillian and Tabor.

Erin looked at the kitchen clock. 5:04 PM. Too early for bed. Her eyes were so heavy. She rose from the kitchenette table, and scuffled off to her bedroom. Just a little catnap would do.

Hopper looked at his watch. She had never been late before. Eleven sat at the kitchen table, nervously picking at her gym shorts.

“Call her,” she said to Hopper insistently.

“I did,” Hopper argued. “Twice.”

“It’s been over an hour,” she said.

“I know,” he said. He stood a moment, running his hand over his beard, staring at the telephone. He pulled it off the receiver, and punched in a number. He put it to his ear, and it felt like every ring lasted a solid minute.

Finally, someone answered.

“Benny’s, how can I help you?” a soft female voice said, harried and busy, and definitely not Erin’s.

“Jillian, it’s Hopper,” he said hopefully. “Is your sister in the diner today?”

Hopper heard Jillian speaking to someone briefly, over the murmur of the Saturday morning breakfast rush at Benny’s.

“No, she’s got the day off today,” she said, unconcerned.

Hopper looked at Eleven, betraying nothing of his own concern for her.

“Well we were supposed to see her this morning, only she didn’t show,” Hopper said. “Do you know where she is?”

“Uh, well, I didn’t exactly check on her, but I assume she’s sleeping in,” Jillian said, her tone impassive. “Hey Hopper, I’m sorry, but if that’s all, I’ve got to let you go.”

“Yeah, yeah, sure thing,” he said, and the two said their goodbyes.

“Jillian seems to think she’s home,” Hopper said.

“We have to see if she’s okay,” she said.

“*We* don’t have to do anything,” Hopper said in his dad-voice. “*You* have to stay here while *I* go check on her.”

“But—“ Eleven started.

“No buts,” Hopper said, holding a finger up. “But you can wait by the phone, okay?”

Eleven crossed her arms and sulked. But Hopper was satisfied to go on his own. It could very well have been a ploy to get him out of the house, to get at Eleven, but the alternative was taking her with him to stumble across something far worse.

No, he would go see for himself. It was probably nothing. Erin probably just overslept. It was a normal human mistake, after all.

He changed out of his running clothes, and put on his civilian clothes, jeans and a flannel button down. He turned the collar of his shirt down, and paused when he saw his holster and revolver on his bedside table. He wasn’t an idiot. He would not be caught without it. He affixed it to his belt, and pulled the bottom of his shirt down to cover it.

He told himself again that she probably overslept.

But for the entire drive over to her house, he couldn’t shake the

feeling that Erin was not the type to oversleep. She had been so regimented in her training of Eleven. She reminded him of one of his drill sergeants in the Marine Corps sometimes.

He pulled up to Erin's house, which in the mid-morning light still looked sleepy. Her Saab was not parked in the driveway. This set off bells in his head, but he pressed on.

He rang the doorbell once. Twice. And knocked. Finally, he tried the front door—open. What in the hell was going on?

Poking his head in the door, Hopper called out.

"Hello?" he stepped in. "Erin? Tabor?" He paused in the living room. Instinctually, Hopper put his hand on the hilt of his sidearm.

He looked down the hallway, and with every step, his heart hammered faster. He looked in each room, first Tabor's, then Jillian's —both empty. The door he assumed was Erin's, at the end of the hallway, was slightly ajar. The only light in the room was the morning light coming through the windows.

"Erin?" he called as he got closer. He pushed the door open slowly, and saw Erin on her bed, over the covers, and completely clothed.

Her face was blue.

"*Erin*!" he shouted, jumping into action. He knelt in front of her, and felt her neck. Her skin was ice cold.

But miraculously he felt a pulse. He shook her, and patted her cheek.

"Erin, wake up," he said. She slowly began to rouse from her sleep. His heart felt like it stopped in his chest. She was alive.

She hummed and looked up at him through bleary eyes.

"Hopper?" she said. "What's wrong?"

"Erin, you didn't show up this morning," Hopper said, feeling that was an idiotic thing to say.

“This morning?” she asked dreamily, pulling herself into a seated position. “But it’s still Friday, it’s only…” she looked over at her alarm clock. “Eight forty-five,” she said, confused.

“Eight forty-five *Saturday morning*,” he said, feeling at her forehead and cheeks.

“That’s impossible, I just went to take a nap, I was so tired,” she said, and put her hands on Hopper’s arms to steady herself.

“You’re freezing,” he said. “Your skin is practically blue.”

His stomach fell. She looked just like Will did.

“I don’t…” she said, and her eyes cleared a bit more with a few blinks. “It was so cold…” In the dream. She remembered it being so cold, but didn’t explain any further to Hopper.

“We have to warm you up,” he said, rubbing his hands over her arms. He pulled a blanket from the end of Erin’s bed, and placed it over her legs. “Here, stay under this.”

He stood, and walked to the bathroom that adjoined to her bedroom. He went to the claw foot tub, and started to run a hot bath for her.

He came out, and crouched over her. “Come on,” he said, putting his hands under her armpits, helping her to a standing position. He gauged her stamina for a moment, and putting aside his sense of propriety, stooped to pick her up. She weakly held onto his neck while he walked her into the bathroom.

He set her down in front of the tub. “I’ll step out, but you’ve got to get in here to warm up,” he said.

Erin’s eyes took on a sharp quality. “*He likes it cold*,” she said abruptly. As if the words had come from an unknown source, Erin put her hand over her mouth.

“What?” Hopper said, and turned the faucet off.

“I—I don’t know why I said that,” Erin said. She considered the bath a moment, and seeming to shake herself from her stupor, nodded.

“Okay.”

She held onto the edge of the tub, and let go to grab at the hem of her shirt. She wobbled in the attempt.

He set his jaw, afraid of offering to help. “Do you need help?” he asked.

She swayed slightly, and nodded. She put her arms around Hopper’s shoulders, and looked into his eyes. Knowing he was hesitating, she nodded again, willing him to help her.

He gripped her shirt, and pulled it up and off. He tossed the shirt aside, and looked to her jeans. He got her jeans unbuttoned, and pulled them down for her as well, leaving her there in white cotton panties and a bra. She stepped out of her jeans.

“Do you want me to…” Hopper started, about to offer to step outside. He saw how Erin gripped the rim of the tub, and gingerly started to step over, before he decided he couldn’t leave her alone. He held onto her waist, and helped her step over.

She sunk into the hot water, and grimaced and made small cries until she was completely up to her neck in water. He knelt by the tub, and watched her, feeling helpless.

She squeezed her eyes shut and panted a few moments, but after a while her breathing slowed, and she looked up at Hopper with clear eyes.

He breathed a little bit easier—it hadn’t gone like this with Will. He had fought so hard against the heat. Whatever had happened to Erin was not the same.

“What happened?” Hopper asked, looking at Erin, pitiful as she was in only her underwear, submerged to her neck in bathwater. Her hair was half wet and half dry, hanging in wet strings around her.

“I don’t know…” Erin said, shaking her head. “I went to bed last night so tired. I just wanted to take a nap. But I…” Erin looked at Hopper with clear realization. “I dreamt I was there. In the Upside Down.”

Hopper pressed his lips together in a tight line.

“What happened there?” he asked.

“I just went there like I always have, in my dreams. But I saw *him*,” she said. “I’ve never seen *him* before.”

“The shadow monster?” Hopper asked, wanting to be sure.

She nodded.

“What did he do?”

Erin sat a moment and thought. “I don’t know. I don’t remember.”

Hopper was quiet. Erin’s face had regained its color, which set him at ease, but not completely.

“Are you feeling okay?” he asked.

Erin breathed in sharply and nodded.

“I’m sorry,” she said, looking up at Hopper. “For not showing up this morning…”

Hopper scoffed, and felt her bath water a second. “I came here to check on you, thought you might be dead when I first saw you, and *you’re* sorry?” He reached up and tucked her half wet hair behind her ear. “You’ve got nothing to be sorry for.”

She laid there in the tub a moment, and smiled at Hopper.

“We haven’t even been out on our first real date, and you’re trying to get me out of my clothes,” she said flatly.

“Trying and succeeding,” Hopper said flatly, sadly. They both chuckled, and Hopper shook his head. “Yeah, you see right through me, huh?”

Erin smiled and laughed lightly. “I got my eye on you, Jim Hopper.”

Erin leaned forward and pulled the plug out of the tub drain. “Would you hand me a towel from in there?” Erin asked, pointing to the

cabinet.

“You sure you’re feeling better?” Hopper asked with suspicion as he handed Erin the towel.

“Better enough to get out of here,” she said, drawing the towel around herself.

With Hopper’s help, Erin dressed herself in a pair of sweats and at Hopper’s insistence, she got into her bed.

“Eleven’s home worrying about you,” he said at the entrance to her room. “I’m going to call and tell her to go to Mike’s. I’ll make you some tea. Don’t move from there.” He gave her a warning look.

Perky though she seemed, Erin felt a sense of dread she couldn’t quite shake. She nodded to Hopper reluctantly, and he left her to her thoughts.

She couldn’t remember the dream. She just knew that she was there, in the Upside Down, and the shadow monster had shown himself to her. Why couldn’t she remember? Did she *want* to remember? Erin pushed the thought from her mind, but she knew something was coming. Something bad. She could feel it in her bones.

Martin Brenner buttoned his tweed jacket over the black mock turtleneck he wore. He felt quite undone without a tie, but this was a new chapter of his life. Many things had changed. If he didn’t keep moving, he knew he would be swept away by the current of change.

So with new resolve, Brenner walked the halls of the Pentagon with his freshly laminated ID pinned to his breast pocket. As he walked, he drew no stares—it felt good to be in a place his presence went unnoticed.

He reached the lobby of the general’s office. A severe-looking woman in a suit sat typing away at her typewriter, and only looked up when Brenner cleared his throat.

“Can I help you?” she said, looking over her spectacles.

“Dr. Martin Brenner to see General Towson,” he said. He unconsciously tightened his grip on the briefcase he carried at his side.

“Of course, Dr. Brenner,” she said. She pressed a button on her desk speaker. “General, your two o’clock is here.”

The general’s fuzzy reply came through the intercom, bidding her send him in.

The woman opened the door for Brenner, and followed him into the office.

The general stood from his desk, and approached Brenner, shaking his hand firmly. Seeing the general there in his full garb suddenly made Brenner second-guess his decision to ditch the ties, but he shrugged it off. He would have the general eating out of his hand in twenty minutes.

“Dr. Brenner, pleasure,” the general said.

“Thank you for seeing me, General,” Brenner replied. “I know you’ve got a busy schedule.”

The two sat across from each other, a desk between them, a reminder that Brenner still had to put on the song and dance.

“Can I get you coffee, or tea, Dr. Brenner?” the secretary asked.

“Ah, no, thank you,” Brenner replied, looking up at her.

The secretary nodded and left the office, closing the door behind her.

“Now,” the General Towson said, interlacing his fingers and resting his arms on his desk, “what is it you’d like to discuss today, doctor?”

“How much do you know about MKUltra?” Brenner started. Among the upper echelons of government, officials had done their best to distance themselves from the program in the wake of the scandal that the newspapers broke. Even though what was published in the paper was so far from the truth it was laughable.

“I know enough,” Towson said, furrowing his caterpillar-like eyebrows. “If you’re here to discuss reviving the program, doctor, I’m afraid—“

“General, the assets created by the CIA are in the wind. All the money, the time… The training. Wasted.”

The general sighed. “I’m sure the losses are hard to take, doctor. The program you ran, the program your father started…”

“Nevermind the program,” Brenner said. “I’m talking about real power, general. Operatives with abilities you can’t even imagine.”

The general barked a laugh. “Frankly, doctor, I always found it hard to believe that real life psychics exist…”

“Tell me, general,” Brenner said, leaning back in his chair. The gesture struck the general as a little too arrogant for a man who was here to ask favors. “What do you know about the Thanksgiving Day fire in Minneapolis? In 1982?”

The general paused. “I don’t know what you mean…”

Brenner reached down and grabbed the briefcase that rested at his feet. He set it on the general’s desk, and opened it, pulling out manila envelopes, and spreading them out.

He opened one, and pulled out a picture. Four, age eighteen, stood against a white backdrop. It looked like any other official photograph of an employee the CIA might keep. But the pictures that Brenner spread out across the general’s desk showed quite a bit more than the standard file.

The pictures showed a burning building, the Northwestern National Bank building, sixteen stories high, and completely ablaze. Other fires raged in the pictures shown. One particularly grizzly photo showed a man’s arm with a blackened burn mark in the shape of a handprint. Brenner put a finger on Four’s picture.

“All her,” Brenner said, watching the general’s eyes widen in surprise. “It’s real, general. All of it, the rumors, they’re all real. The CIA is willing to flush all this work, all these assets, down the toilet, but I

still believe they can be of some use."

Brenner opened his briefcase once more, and pulled out a reel of film in a canister. Across it, the printed label read, "Four – Training Display, 1 of 5".

"I think you'll want to see this," Brenner said, feeling confident he had his hooks in the general.

The film reel ended, spinning freely, leaving a white backdrop. Brenner rose from his chair and switched the light on.

Four military officers sat in silence, some with their hands over their mouths in silent disbelief. Having seen the films a first time, General Towson insisted on showing other officers.

"You mean to tell me," one colonel said, "these… *assets* are just running loose in America?"

"Running loose, Colonel," Brenner said, standing in front of them. "Running lose, Colonel, and banding together. The asset with pyrokinetic and psychic abilities, Four, has been rounding up any assets that will follow her. She has Nine and Ten posing as her brother and sister, and Eleven lives as the adopted daughter of the town sheriff. Who knows what she plans to do with them."

"Are they a threat?" General Towson asked, his face stern, his voice full of meaning. *Do they need to be neutralized*, Brenner knew he was asking.

Brenner pressed his lips together in a thin line.

"They aren't as compliant as they were when they were in the program," Brenner admitted. "They all have experienced a bit of a normal life, and that is something they won't let go of very easily. But I think they can be convinced. Maybe not all of them…"

"Say we *do* bring them back into the fold… Say we *do* pick up the pieces that MKUltra left behind so sloppily…" the colonel said, shifting in his seat. "Who do you expect to run this new program? *You*?"

Brenner looked at his shoes a moment, and dug his hands into the pockets of his navy blue slacks. “I’m not saying that, Colonel. But these assets *do* know me. I raised them. That is an advantage I am sure no one else has.”

The four of the officers all exchanged looks. They were looking for doubt, uncertainty. Permission.

“Four and Eleven,” Towson said confidently. “They are non-negotiable. I think I speak for the others when I say they must be recovered.”

Brenner nodded. “I agree, General. Four and Eleven’s powers are quite complimentary.”

“Alright, Brenner,” Towson said. “You’ll have your team. But you will be answerable to the officer of our choosing. This isn’t MKUltra.”

Brenner smirked. “Of course, General. When do we begin?”

9. Teaser and the Firecat

Notes for the Chapter:

> And without further ado, the smut y'all have been waiting for. Why dress it up? That's what we're all here for, isn't it?

Ted Wheeler flipped the burgers on the grill. Out of the corner of her eye, Erin inspected Ted's handiwork, noting how dry it all looked. Was she actually turning into a food snob, posing as a diner owner? Still, she smiled, and looked back at Joyce Byers, who was talking.

Erin drank from her glass bottle, and smiled at Joyce's retelling of a story from her days as a teenager with Hopper.

"Yeah, I think if the old man knew I became sheriff of this place, he'd have had a stroke," Hopper said, drinking and pushing himself further back into his lawn chair.

"The principal had it out for him," Joyce clarified, looking at Erin's confused expression.

"I did deserve it though," Hopper said, smiling to himself.

"Yes, you did," Joyce said with a chuckle.

"What about you, did you have your rebellious streak?" Joyce asked, swatting away a mosquito. They came out by the droves in the early evenings at the tail end of summer.

Erin shifted uncomfortably in her seat. "Uh…" Erin started, remembering her own rebelliousness.

She stalked down the hallways of Hawkins lab, using her persuasive power to stop all who came in her path. She had stopped trying to stem the flow of her bleeding nose, and began bleeding from her ears as she got closer to the ground level of the lab when he ran to catch up with her.

"Four, stop!" Brenner yelled, his tie undone, his eyes ablaze.

She wheeled around and faced him, tears streaking her cheeks.

“I’m leaving,” she said, tears still falling.

“Come back, darling,” he said. He reached her, and was surprised to find that she did not push him away. Still, she kept a stony expression, knowing it would not be easy to leave him. But she had to.

“I can’t,” she said. Her eyes fixed momentarily on his cheekbone—the bruise was already forming. She hadn’t held anything back.

“I shouldn’t have asked that of you—I should have known you weren’t ready,” he said, putting his hands on her hips. That just made it hurt even more.

“Get your hands off me,” she said quietly through gritted teeth.

“You knew this was what you were being trained to do,” he said.

“And you thought—“ Erin started, almost losing her composure, her lip quivering. She swallowed and tried again. “And you thought that the best time to tell me was when you were… when you were with me?”

Brenner shook his head. “I don’t know what I was thinking. Come back upstairs. You’re wearing yourself out. We’ll take you into the lab and fix you up.”

Erin shook her head, her eyes clear, peering out through damp eyelashes. Hours later, when she would look in the mirror of a bus stop bathroom, she would find that blood vessels around her steel grey irises had broken in her strain to use her power.

“If you can bear to let another man touch me, you’re not the man I thought you were,” she said.

“Four, you are a CIA asset, and there are things that might not be pleasant, but we do them anyway because that’s our job,” he said sternly. “You knew this was part of it.”

Erin chuckled, and wiped at the blood at her nose with the hem of her sleeve. She looked at it.

“Is it a job when it’s not a choice?” Erin asked. “If I wanted to walk out those doors, to find any family I have left… would you let me go? Would I be allowed to live a life I choose?”

Brenner was silent. That was enough of an answer for Erin.

“We can’t just let you go, Four. Even if you leave, we’ll always find you,” Brenner said. His eyes fastened on Erin’s. “I will always find you.”

“No,” Erin said, backing out of Brenner’s embrace. “You don’t get it both ways. You don’t get to ask me to share every part of my body and mind with the enemy, only to expect to share my bed at night.”

Brenner swallowed. His expression grew grave. He knew he was not going to be able to talk her down. He reached into his pocket, grabbing the syringe he so hastily had loaded when she had gotten through enough guards. As he drew it up to her neck, Erin deflected his arm with hers, knocking the syringe out of his hands, sending it flying across the tiles.

“Stop!” she commanded, and Brenner left it where it had fallen. She backed away from him. She knew she would have to go now. Her power still only lasted on most people about three or four minutes. “Do not follow me. Stay where you are.”

“Four!” he pleaded. She shook her head, and ran through the door, leaving Brenner standing stupidly.

In the present, Erin cleared her throat.

“I guess you could say I did,” Erin said to Joyce. “I had to grow up pretty quickly, taking care of Tabor and Jillian…”

Joyce nodded. Hopper looked over at Erin from his lawn chair, the two of them locking eyes. Her heart beat faster. She knew what he was picturing, and she regretted it then.

“You’re a great sister. To take care of them after your parents died in a car crash—I can’t imagine,” Joyce said, and all three of them looked over at the group of kids playing in the street, setting off firecrackers and lighting sparklers now that it was dark enough for them. Jillian and Tabor were helping Mike, Dustin, Will, Lucas, Max and Eleven with lighters.

Eleven held out a sparkler to Jillian, and she lit it for her. Eleven walked off, proudly waving it over Mike and Lucas's heads.

"Thanks," Erin said. "They make it easy."

The rest of the evening progressed lazily as the neighborhood bid farewell to summer and all that came with it. Erin felt a growing sense of contentment—this was the kind of life she had hoped Jillian and Tabor would have. Still, at the edge of her mind, she felt afraid that it would all fall through her fingers like sand.

When she looked at Hopper's profile in the dusky light, a knot tied in her stomach, and she had to move to distract herself from it. Jillian and Tabor had the luxury of blind happiness, but she knew that sometimes good things didn't last.

As she helped clean off the card tables full of food, Hopper appeared at her side, lending a hand.

"You okay?" he asked quietly.

Erin smiled demurely. "Yeah," she said, tucking her hair behind an ear.

Hopper straightened up, watching Erin pack away the summer feast, avoiding his gaze. He didn't have to be psychic to know that something was bothering her.

"It's okay, you can talk to me…" he started, only to have Eleven run up to him, grabbing a fistful of his plaid shirt.

"Hop," she called him, using her sometimes-nickname for him. "Can I spend the night at Mike's tonight? Pleeease."

"You've spent enough nights over there," he said.

"But we're gonna watch *Rangers in the Lost Ark*," she argued.

"*Raiders OF the Lost Ark*," Lucas corrected from afar, taking a break from throwing poppers down onto the pavement.

"It's okay, Jim," Karen said, tying the top of a garbage bag full of

paper plates. “The boys and Max are all staying over. They’re going to put their sleeping bags down in the basement.”

Hopper sighed. “Fine,” he said, knowing the battle was already lost.

Eleven smiled, and tore off for the Hopper house to grab her sleeping bag.

“I swear, any more nights spent over at your house, Karen, and you all might as well file for joint custody."

Karen smiled, and hefted the bag over her shoulder. “It’s the last of summer, Jim. One last hurrah before fall. It’s okay, really…”

Hopper sighed, and came back to Erin’s side. He watched her break down the card table, and just as he opened his mouth to draw more out of her, Jillian and Tabor rushed up to them, much like Eleven had.

“There’s a movie at the theater we want to see, can we take the Saab?” Jillian asked hastily, barely pausing for breath.

Erin’s eyes went wide. She looked at Hopper, and the two shared an incredulous look.

“Was there something in the Kool-aid that I should know about?” Erin asked with a wry smile.

“What?” Tabor asked.

“We just thought that you and H— *ow*!” Jillian said, grabbing her shin, which Tabor had not-too-subtly kicked.

“Sorry, spasm,” Tabor said, holding Jillian’s arm, silently willing her to stop talking. “We just mean, a few people from the block are going, and we thought we could join in. Since the diner’s closed tomorrow and all.”

Erin tilted her head back, and looked up at Tabor through suspicious eyes. “Uh huh… I see what you’re doing.”

“What?” Tabor asked, barely hiding the grin behind his stony

expression. “Well anyway, we’ll be back before midnight. We can drop you at home, or…”

“I’ve got it,” Hopper said, cutting through the awkward pretense, rolling his eyes at the machinations of the younger folks present.

Erin handed over her keys, and the two of them followed a cavalcade of cars, driven by neighborhood teenagers, down the road, leaving just a few adults in their wake, with the last bits of evidence there was a barbecue.

Erin picked up one end of the card table, and Hopper the other. Without a word, they began walking towards the Hopper residence to put the table back where it belonged in their garage.

“Somehow I think that those kids were doing more than setting off fireworks together,” Erin said as they set the table down in the garage, lit poorly by the one dangling light in the center.

“You picked that up, huh?” Hopper said, righting himself and planting his hands on his hips. The two of them stood there awkwardly, looking at each other, hoping the other would say something first.

“Wanna come in for a beer? I overestimated how much I needed for tonight,” he said, hoping he sounded casual enough.

Erin nodded, and followed Hopper to the door in the garage. Hopper pressed a button on the wall, and the garage closed behind them.

With the door to the laundry room closed behind them, Hopper led Erin into the kitchen. He busied himself by grabbing a few bottles from the refrigerator, and opened them barehanded.

Erin drank from the bottle, and looked to Hopper expectantly.

He picked up on the cue. “*This* isn’t weird,” he said with a smile.

Erin chuckled, relieved that he was addressing the elephant in the room. She stepped back into the kitchen cabinets, and leaned into them, gripping her bottle with both hands. Assessing her body language, Hopper walked to Erin, and gently took the bottle from

her, placing both his and hers on the counter behind her.

Erin's heart sped up, and she looked up at Hopper, who stood even taller than her as she leaned against the counter. It seemed like time slowed down, and he placed his hands on her hips. For a moment, he continued to look down at her in silence.

"I've wanted to kiss you all night," he said quietly. "Is that okay?"

Erin sighed slightly, smiled and nodded. Hopper leaned down and kissed her gently, lingering. He increased his pressure steadily, drawing Erin out of whatever nervous state she'd been in.

He leaned into her, his body against hers, and he drew his hands up to the sides of her neck, holding her to him. She clutched at his flannel shirt for support as her head swam.

When he pulled away from her, Erin looked up at Hopper with a glazed over expression before smiling, chuckling, and putting her head on his chest.

Martin Brenner picked at a hangnail on his thumb with his ring finger, and wincing when he drew blood, flattened his hand on his knee. He had been sitting in the black sedan now for two hours. He knew he was not far from Hawkins now. He knew the drive well.

The doctors in the car all remained quiet, impassive. They were there to do a job, and they had only met Brenner that morning. Everything they were doing was unchartered territory for them. None of them really knew what awaited them at the Hawkins National Laboratory. Not even Brenner, really, since his expulsion from the program, and the lab's closing last year. What would they find behind those boarded up doors?

The caravan that followed them was a series of inconspicuous vehicles—trucks, utility vans, and moving vans, all of them carrying soldiers, equipment, ammunition, all meant for the surveillance and capture of a group of exceptional individuals.

Brenner had to fight the urge to order the corporal driving him to

Hawkins to drive straight to the house that had been rented using Four's alias, Erin Pearson. But he knew if he were going to take all of them alive, and ideally willingly, he would have to be careful. Slip into Hawkins unnoticed.

And slip into Hawkins unnoticed is exactly what they did. By eleven in the evening, a pair of bolt cutters snapped through the padlock on the gates of Hawkins Lab, and for the first time in two years, Martin Brenner walked the halls of the lab he once controlled.

Erin set her drink down on Hopper's coffee table, and walked the perimeter of his living room, pausing before a framed picture of a little girl with blonde pigtails. Sarah. Erin touched a finger to the frame gently and smiled. Erin got the distinct impression that Sarah's picture wouldn't have been out if it hadn't been for Eleven, and this made her happy.

She moved on to the record collection on a shelf in the corner. She thumbed through them mindlessly, pausing at one that caught her eye. The childlike cover art was charming, and she studied the details through the calm haze of just enough alcohol.

"That's a good one," Hopper's voice came from behind her.

Erin put the record down. "Sorry," she said.

"No, no," he said, taking the record from its spot on the shelf. "Never apologize for inspecting someone's collection. You can tell a lot about a person from what records they have on the shelf."

"You can?" Erin asked.

"Yeah," Hopper said, unsure if she was serious.

Erin sighed. She had no records on her shelf, but she didn't dare say that to Hopper. Sometimes she felt how sad it made him when she revealed how little of the world she actually knew and had experienced.

"All mine are at least five years old…" Hopper said, turning the album over, looking at the pair of boots on the back. "Set in my

ways, I guess…"

Hopper looked back at Erin, and gauged her expression.

"Have you heard this one?" he asked. "*Teaser and the Firecat* is a classic."

Erin smiled and scoffed. "I think you know the answer to that question. I don't think my listening to—" Erin looked at the album, "'Cat Stevens' was a high priority to the CIA."

Hopper nodded, and slid the black disc out of its sleeve, placing it gently on the turntable. With the flip of a few switches, it was spinning, and with the needle placed, Cat Stevens began to sing about the wind. Hopper adjusted the volume, and the record played gently in the background.

Hopper took Erin's hand, and pulled her to him, putting his other hand on her hip. He began to sway, coaxing her to dance with him.

"What are you doing?" Erin asked with a small chuckle.

"C'mon," he said, goading her with his uniquely-Hopper way of putting someone at ease. "Humor me."

Erin sighed, and they danced there in the middle of Hopper's living room.

"So are you going to tell me what's been on your mind tonight?" Hopper asked.

Erin licked her lips and looked at an unfixed point beyond Hopper's shoulder.

"It's nothing, Hopper, really," Erin said. She moved her thumb on his shoulder, feeling how solid he was, how real, just to remind herself.

"Friends don't lie," Hopper said, reminding her of the unofficial motto of Eleven and her boys.

Erin smirked. "What you and Joyce were talking about tonight… It's me, I just get reminders of how much I missed out on."

Hopper stopped moving his feet, and looked down at her. “That’s over now,” he said. “And if I have anything to do with it, we can whittle away at some of those things.”

“Like what?” Erin asked, amused.

“Well, you tell me,” Hopper said. “See, we’ve already taken care of one—Cat Stevens.”

Erin smiled and shook her head. “I wouldn’t even know where to start.”

“We’ll take it one step at a time,” he said, and leaned down to kiss her neck lightly.

“I’ve never done this before,” Erin said, and just as she did, she regretted it.

Hopper’s eyes narrowed and he looked at Erin for an explanation.

“I mean… dated. The intricacies of *that* are lost to me.”

Hopper’s jaw flexed when he thought about other intricacies that *weren’t* lost to her.

“I don’t know what’s right, or… how to say something the right way,” Erin said, lost for a way to explain just how unsure she was of herself.

“There are no rules,” Hopper said. “That’s your first lesson. Just do what feels comfortable to you. And if I do something you don’t want me to do, tell me.”

Erin smiled, and put her hand on Hopper’s scruffy cheek.

“You’re not at all what you want the world to think you are,” she said, unconsciously tapping into his emotions through their physical contact.

“You’ve got a pretty good read on me,” he said with a wry smile. “Guess it just comes with the territory.”

Erin shook her head. “I’m sorry. I could turn it off completely, but I don’t want to. Not with you.”

Hopper put his hands firmly on her hips, and pulled her to him, lowering his head, and kissing her temple. “Then don’t,” he whispered.

Erin’s heart skipped, and she moved back to kiss him as he leaned down. Eagerly he returned her kiss, and he began walking her back to his couch. Her calves found the cushions, and the two of them gingerly sat, finding each other again when they did.

Erin, emboldened by Hopper’s words, pulled herself up and onto his lap, holding onto his shoulders for support. Hopper placed his strong hands behind her and pulled her into him, deepening their contact. As he gripped her hips, she tilted them into him, and unconsciously she let out a small whimper of wanting.

Hopper grunted in satisfaction, running his hands up her back, but pulled back just enough to look her in the eyes.

“I don’t want…” he panted. She tilted her hips again, and his breath caught in his chest. “I don’t want you to—”

“I want this,” Erin said, moving her mouth to his neck and kissing him deeply there. “I want all of it.”

Hopper nodded, giving in to what Erin wanted, and what he had initially tried not to want when he met her. He found the front of her chambray shirt, and began unbuttoning it. When it was undone, he kissed her collarbone before stopping himself.

“Not here,” he said. He didn’t want their first time to be on his couch. Without waiting for her reply, Hopper scooted forward to stand, and Erin backed up to let him.

He placed his hands firmly under her arms, and lifted her to him. She wrapped her legs around him as he effortlessly carried her down the hallway into his room.

He sat her down gently. As if he had broken some spell in her, Erin stood, and put her hand on Hopper’s chest to stop him.

“Lay down,” she said. He complied, watching her expectantly.

She backed away from the bed and shrugged herself out of her shirt before removing her black jeans. Her eyes never left Hopper’s as she unhooked her bra, and stepped out of her underwear, casting both aside slowly. She stood there and allowed Hopper to look at her before she knelt down on the bed, crawling closer to him. Her eyes challenged him.

Was this what Brenner had taught her? Or was this something else? Hopper regretted the thought as soon as he had it. Erin sat back, stopping her progress towards Hopper.

“No, I didn’t mean it like that, I…” He said, and shook his head in disbelief at how idiotic the thought had been.

He reached forward and pulled Erin to him, her bare skin meeting his fully clothed body.

“I’m sorry,” he said, kissing her shoulder. “I was wrong to go there.”

Erin sighed, and looked down at Hopper.

“You show me,” Erin said, and she got off his lap, scooting her way up his bed, resting her head on his pillow.

“What?” he asked.

“Show me how *you* would make love to me,” she said, and he could detect no hurt in her voice. Instead, he heard eagerness.

He nodded, and crawled up to meet her, kissing her sweetly, before tracing his way down her body with his mouth. He paused at her breasts, small as they were, and admired how her freckles covered her whole body.

He followed his way down to her stomach, and positioned himself between her legs. He draped her legs over his shoulders, and he paused to look up at her as she gazed down at him. He touched the outside of her thigh, and found that she was trembling.

“I can stop if you want,” he said, waiting.

She shook her head. “Please, Jim,” she said. The sound of his name sent electricity through him, and with her permission, he began kissing his way up her inner thigh. He reached her center, and kissed her sides, just shy of where she wanted him. His tongue ran along those not-quite-there spots, and she whined in protest.

He smiled, and found her center, running his tongue upwards. She cried out in pleasure, gripping the quilt. He circled her clitoris, never using too much contact. This was very much an exploratory venture for Hopper. He prided himself on learning a woman’s body, and he wanted to learn Erin’s quickly. He reached up with a free hand, and put one finger inside her, which she responded to by rocking her hips. Smiling into her, he put another inside and looked up at her.

As one hand gripped the quilt, Erin’s other hand shot to Hopper’s hair as he deepened his pressure. He knew she was close now, so he kept doing exactly what he was doing. Within a moment, she cried out and climaxed. He let her ride it out before she began to squirm away from him, too sensitive for any more contact.

Hopper crawled up the bed, and hovered over Erin, placing a knee between her legs. Her head swam, and she panted slightly, but when she met Hopper’s eyes, she smiled, and pulled him down by the neck to kiss him.

Erin found the front of Hopper’s shirt, unbuttoning it from the top down. She pulled it down over his shoulders, and he shrugged himself out of it. Hopper laid down beside Erin, and put his hand in her hair, pulling her to him in a kiss. She held onto his bare waist, feeling the warmth of him. She ran her hands up his chest, learning the shape of him.

She smiled into Hopper’s kiss when her hands found the sparse hair on his chest. Not waiting for Hopper to act, Erin’s hand found the waistband of his jeans, and she tugged at the fabric, making enough room for her fingers to fit behind the button, which she promptly undid.

She could sense his breath catching in his chest, but he didn’t stop her. She reached in and grabbed the length of him. She gave herself a moment to appreciate him, his size, how he felt in her hands.

Everything about him felt different than the only man she'd ever been with. Unsatisfied with the limited access she had, Erin sat up and pulled at the remaining articles separating them.

Hopper assisted, and within a moment, finally there was nothing between them, no pretenses, nothing to hide their insecurities behind. Erin looked into Hopper's eyes with such genuine ardor that it nearly took Hopper's breath away.

She reached for him again, and finding him, she elicited a sigh from Hopper. As she moved her hand, she looked down at him.

He was bigger than Brenner, but not unreasonably so.

Hopper, unable to hold himself back any longer, gently pushed Erin onto her back, and settled in between her legs, severing her hold on him. She put her arms around his shoulders, and looked up into his sea blue eyes. He was searching her face for permission. Without a word, Erin nodded, and Hopper tilted his hips forward, sliding into her slowly, easily.

Erin's nails dug into his shoulders as he buried into her. She cried out in pleasure, but squirmed under the pressure of him.

"You okay?" he asked. Erin sensed his thoughts—he knew he might be too much for her all at once.

Erin nodded. "Don't stop," she said.

Hopper began to slowly rock into her, allowing her time to adjust to him. In a moment, she moved with him, and the two of them lost all sense of time.

Hopper buried his face in Erin's neck, saying her name quietly and reverently, over and over. Erin felt the buildup coming to the breaking point in Hopper's mind, and for a moment she felt Hopper's regret that he wasn't going to last as long as he wanted.

She shook her head, and kissed his neck. "No, don't stop," she said.

And within a moment, Hopper gave a shuddering sigh, and lost control. He came hard, bringing Erin with him over the precipice.

She gripped his hair in rapt pleasure, riding the waves to the end.

Hopper stayed inside her, but pulled his head back, looking down at Erin.

“That was…” he said, struggling for words. He had felt her in his mind. He hadn’t lasted long, but it felt so much more intense with her. “Did I feel… you? Was that you in my mind too?”

Erin looked up at Hopper sheepishly. Despite him seeming so open to her abilities, she still wondered if forming a psychic connection while they were intimate would go over well.

“God, you’re amazing,” Hopper whispered. “Is it always like that?” he asked.

Erin shook her head, and smiled up at him. “Only when I want it to be.”

Notes for the Chapter:

> Comments are always appreciated!!!! Every time I got a new comment, I added a little more to this chapter, so your encouragement really works!
>
> Oh, and since fanfics don't normally highlight consent AND I think Hopper would be big on it anyway, I hope you all don't mind that I threw some little nuggets.

10. But It Takes So Long, My Lord

It was Hopper's snoring that roused Erin from her sleep. So used to being alone in her own bed, she wasn't used to being next to someone, let alone someone who snored. She laid on her side, watching Hopper in the dim light cast from the hallway, and smiled. Her stomach thrilled at how happy she was, what she had shared with Hopper a few hours earlier.

Not wanting to wake him, Erin looked over at the glowing alarm clock that read 2:35 AM. Moving slowly, Erin stood, and looked around for her shirt. Unable to find it in the jumble of articles, Erin sighed and settled for Hopper's, which fell just at the tops of her thighs.

"I could get used to seeing you in my clothes," a gruff voice called to her from the bed. Erin looked over at its origin sheepishly. "Where you headed off to?"

Erin tucked her messy hair behind her ear. "I… I thought it was a bit late. Maybe I need to get home."

Hopper smiled and sat up, holding out a hand. "Come back to bed," he said. He waved her over sleepily. "Come on."

Erin walked over to him, regretful of her decision to try to leave. She took Hopper's offered hand, and he pulled her onto his chest abruptly, but playfully. He held her by her waist.

"Eleven won't be home 'til late morning, and Tabor and Jillian knew exactly what they were doing. They're home, in their beds."

Erin blinked, and looked down at Hopper. "Are you sure you want me to stay?"

Hopper's eyes widened. "Stay?" He chuckled. "Of course I want you to stay. You think I'm done with you, hmm?" He rolled Erin onto her back, and gently dug his fingers into her sides, tickling her. She laughed and squirmed.

He smiled and kissed her, giving her a reprieve from his tickling, which she happily returned. When he pulled back, he looked down at her.

“Erin, this wasn’t a mistake for me. I want you here. I want you to feel like you can stay the night… if you want.”

Erin touched Hopper’s beard, something that she was finding she loved to do. “I don’t want to complicate things with Eleven…”

Hopper sighed and thought a moment. “I won’t hide my feelings for you from her. Not anyone.”

“But…” Erin started, swallowing a moment, allowing herself to think. “Won’t it be… confusing for her?”

“Eleven and my relationship isn’t what you would call traditional, Erin. There are no hard and fast rules on how to tell your adopted daughter you’re dating their psychic powers teacher.”

“Is that what we’re doing?” Erin asked, her stomach fluttering. This conversation was happening a lot faster than she had anticipated or foreseen.

Hopper sighed, and put his chin on Erin’s chest, breathing her in a moment. “I know it’s early.,. We can take things as they come. But it’s good, what’s going on between us. Isn’t it?”

Erin smiled and nodded. “I just don’t want to scare you away,” Erin admitted, her eyes tearing up involuntarily. She blinked them back. “I haven’t had a lot of good things in my life, and I just don’t want them to slip through my fingers.”

Hopper chuckled. “Scare *me* away? You’re killing me, kid…” Hopper pulled the neckline of his shirt aside on Erin’s chest, and placed a deep kiss there, which threatened to derail their conversation.

Erin closed her eyes and let out a contented sigh. “Who’re you calling kid?” She looked down at him with mock warning.

He smiled a wicked smile, and unbuttoned the first button from the top. He kissed the exposed flesh. “I’m just a few years shy of being

too old for you."

"I guess that means you've only got a few good years left in you," Erin said, challenging him, drawing her knees up to hold him in place. "I better make the best of them while I still can."

"Now you're just asking for it," Hopper said, and dug his fingers into Erin's side again, tickling her mercilessly.

She squealed and laughed in desperation, trying to squirm out of Hopper's grasp, but he held onto her. He relented a moment, and let her catch her breath before starting again.

"No, no," Erin cried, and pawed at Hopper's arms. "No more," she said between laughs.

"You had enough?" Hopper asked, his mouth inches from hers. She nodded, and he brought his mouth down on hers. He kissed her deeply a few moments before he grasped the front tails of his shirt that Erin had donned. In a primal moment, Hopper pulled the two sides apart, parting the few buttons Erin had fastened from the fabric.

Erin exhaled in surprise. This side of Hopper was unexpected, but not unwelcome. He looked down at her with urgency. He held her gaze a moment, waiting for permission, verbal or nonverbal.

Erin looked up at Hopper, running both hands up his arms, and coming to rest at the nape of his neck. She nodded, and held his gaze through heavily lidded eyes.

Hopper lowered himself slightly, and thrust forward, finding Erin's already-wet center. She moaned as she adjusted yet again to his size. Hopper immediately began thrusting, gentle at first, but picking up in urgency.

Erin gripped Hopper's hair, buried her face in his shoulder. They continued like this for several minutes, until Hopper and Erin both began to sweat.

"Erin…" Hopper said, nearing his climax.

"Don't stop," Erin whispered into his ear. "Don't stop, Jim."

This sent him over the edge, and they both came at once, gripping each other tighter, slowing their pace until they were spent. When they finally reached the bottom, they pulled back from one another and shared a few sweet kisses. A few baby hairs had been plastered to her forehead in the sweat of exertion, and he smoothed them back for her. He kissed her forehead, and pulled away from her, severing their connection.

When they had recovered, Erin sat up and took Jim's shirt the rest of the way off, and tossed it into a chair in the corner.

"Well, *that* will need mending," Erin said, looking down at Hopper, who had one hand behind his head, and one on his stomach.

He smiled. "Sorry," he chuckled.

"It's your shirt," Erin said, "unless you're apologizing because you think I'm going to sew those buttons back on there, in which case, I have some bad news." Erin leaned down, and paused before Hopper's mouth, whispering, "I didn't learn too many domestic skills in psychic spy school." She briefly kissed him, and laid down beside him.

"Oh, I fully expected to be sewing those back on by myself," he said, pulling her close, helping her nestle into the crook of his arm.

"Oh, okay, good," Erin said, and sighed.

"But I meant I'm sorry if that was too much for you," he said.

Erin reached into his mind and saw herself through Hopper's eyes. In his mind he replayed tearing the sides of the shirt away from each other, sending the buttons to the floor.

Erin gave a half smile. "Don't hold back with me," Erin said. "From now on, if there's something I don't want you to do, I will tell you, okay?" She stared Hopper down with a smile in her eyes.

"Okay."

"Be sure you've gotten every room," Brenner said to the men in white

suits, their combat boots covered by booties to leave no trace of their presence.

“Yes sir,” they all murmured, making their way through the house.

Brenner ran his hand down the small, chrome, mod table in the kitchenette of the Pearson home. He sat quietly at the head of the table, thinking about Four sitting there with Nine and Ten, eating breakfast like a normal family. Then, he imagined him and Four across from each other, Four in a cotton dressing robe, and himself in jeans and a fisherman’s sweater. With one leg over the other, Brenner read the morning paper, and Four read a paperback novel, the both of them sipping morning coffee.

It was a pretty picture, but it would never happen. Not while everything stayed the way it was. He had to get her back first. He wanted her to come of her own free will, or to think it was her own free will, but he wasn’t so naïve as to think that would happen. But she would come to accept it, and they would grow to be happy. In a way.

“Sir, how many in each bedroom?” One of the soldiers asked, pulling his mask away from his face.

“Two,” he said, his jaw flexing. “Four in the master.”

He stood, and followed the soldier back to the master bedroom, the room he knew to be Erin’s. As two soldiers carefully placed surveillance equipment—microphones and cameras—Brenner filed through the clothes hanging in her closet. Most of the articles were mundane enough, but he paused at a few that led him to question where she would wear them.

Looking back at her bed, made perfectly, Brenner decided maybe no one had shared her bed. He looked in her bathroom, and saw no trace of another person’s presence. But he couldn’t be too careful. If anyone questioned him, he would reply that it was important to know all variables before a play was made. He only half believed it himself.

With the bugs placed, Brenner followed his soldiers out, pausing one

last time before closing the front door, muttering to himself. “See you soon, my darling Four.”

Erin scrubbed at the counter top, swaying slightly to the sound of George Harrison singing *My Sweet Lord*. She sprayed further down the line, and paused to clear the plates left by the last customers at the bar. She turned around and put the plates in the sink for Tabor to clean, and went back to the counter.

The bell above the door jingled, and in strode three men in Hawkins Police uniform. Erin smiled wildly, but stifled it when she made eye contact with Hopper. When he was on the job, things were different. They had kept a reasonable distance between each other while he worked, but today it appeared that Benny’s was finally the choice lunch destination.

Erin put the rag down on the counter, and grabbed her pad and pen. She tucked her hair behind her ear, and walked over to the booth occupied by the three men.

“Officer Powell, Officer Callahan,” Erin said sweetly, and breathily continued. “Chief Hopper.” She cleared her throat and kept her face impassive. “What can I get you all to drink?”

The three of them ordered coffee, and Erin turned around to set a pot brewing, and to let them come up with their orders. Erin’s breath caught in her chest, and she looked over at the booth. Hopper caught her gaze out of the corner of his eye, and looked back to Powell and Callahan, who continued their conversation unaware of anything passing between the proprietor of Benny’s and their chief.

Erin’s eyes cheated off to the side, towards the hall that led to the bathrooms, the break room, and a supply closet, and without waiting, Erin walked off and disappeared into that hallway, deciding on the supply closet.

When she clicked the dangling light switch, she had barely closed the door, when it opened again. Hopper strode in, taking off his hat (*god, she loved him in that hat*), and scooped Erin up into his arms immediately. They kissed passionately. Erin put her arms around

Hopper's neck, allowing him to hoist her up off the ground. Her legs wrapped around his midsection, and he pressed her against the wall for support.

"Good afternoon, chief," Erin said, after the two parted for a breather.

"Ma'am," he said, ducking down for another kiss, this one lighter and sweeter.

"When can I see you?" Erin asked as Hopper let her down.

"This weekend," Hopper said, keeping his arms around Erin's waist. She could sense his sincerity, and it soothed her.

"Have you told her yet?" she asked.

Hopper sighed and shook his head. "Tonight."

"Good," Erin said with a smile. She knew he would tell Eleven. What Hopper said he would do, he would do.

"Now, my coworkers on the other hand… I won't tell them until after I tell *her*."

Erin nodded in mock seriousness. "Fair enough."

The two stood there, looking at each other lovingly. Erin sighed. "I have to go take some orders now, Jim. There are some very handsome men in uniforms out there, and I'd hate to keep them waiting—" Erin was cut off by Hopper gripping her sides like he was about to tickle her. She slid away from him and gripped the doorknob, leaving before him.

She made it to the counter just in time to pour three cups of coffee, and made her way over just as Hopper had sat down. When each officer had his mug, Erin pulled out her pad and stood ready to take their order.

"Have we all decided?" Erin asked.

Each of them ordered, and Erin smiled. "I'll put those orders in, and

they'll be out soon."

Erin left to put the orders in, and with every step away from Hopper's booth she took, Erin felt as if she were taking one more step into a pool of ice water. She clutched at her chest, unable to continue, but still the cold progressed.

She squeezed her eyes shut, hoping the feeling would pass, but when it didn't, she opened her eyes to a dark diner. No one sat at any of the booths, and it looked like a storm was coming outside. None of the lights were on in the diner. Specks of dust flitted around the diner.

"No, no, no," Erin said, her stomach filling with dread. She knew exactly where she was. The Upside Down. But the gates were all closed. How could she be seeing this?

Her feet moved of their own volition, and she walked out to the parking lot to look at the storm brewing in the sky above—pink and blue lightning lit up the cloudy sky, and she saw the spindly legs of the shadow monster, which was walking closer and closer. It was still at least a mile away, but he was there all the same.

Erin put her hands on the sides of her temples, and squeezed her eyes shut again. "Not there, not there…" she repeated. When she opened her eyes again, she still saw the Upside Down, and as tears rolled down her cheeks, she lost consciousness and fell to the pavement.

On the other side, in the side apart from the Upside Down, Hopper rushed to his feet, and ran out into the parking lot to kneel beside Erin. He hadn't seen her until she was already out the door. Until it was too late, and she was already falling. It happened in slow motion.

He called her name as her head met the pavement.

11. Cornered

Notes for the Chapter:

> Holy shit, a new chapter? After all this time? Whaaaat? I am trying my hardest to make progress with this story. I'd like to have it finished this summer. I make no promises, but please know I haven't forgotten this story! As always, your comments are like gold to me. Thank you so much for your kind words.

Erin's eyes were so heavy. She was going to rest them a moment. She could do that, right? That was okay.

"Erin…" a sweet voice beckoned, stirring her from her sleep. How long had she been dozing? A minute? An hour?

Erin's eyes flickered open. She saw the nurse in her salmon scrubs, clicking on a pen light, checking her pupillary response. The nurse prattled off another few questions meant to test her cognitive function, and when she'd answered them right, the nurse sighed in contentment. She was still okay.

The night had been going this way for hours. She was allowed to sleep, but was awoken every hour or so to check that her concussion had not worsened. The equipment needed to check for hemorrhaging was new to the hospital. Expensive to run. And Doctor Francis thought it wouldn't be necessary to scan her brain if she was still responding well. Erin was relieved when he came to this decision—there was no telling what her brain would look like compared to someone who was "neurotypical".

"Do you need anything?" the nurse asked, more to Hopper than to Erin, who wanted nothing more than to sleep undisturbed the whole night.

"No," Hopper said, leaning forward, and smoothing his hands out over his uniform pants. His hat rested on a nearby table.

When the nurse had gone, Erin sighed and looked over at Hopper.

“You should go home,” she said. “Eleven needs you too.”

“Tabor and Jillian are watching her,” he told her, knowing she remembered, but trying to put her mind at ease. “I’m not leaving you alone.”

“At least get yourself some coffee or something from the cafeteria…” Erin said. “Have you eaten anything? I never did get those orders in,” she added with a sad and exhausted smirk.

“I’m fine,” he said. His eyes lingered on the matting in her hair—where she had bled so freely, and where they had stapled the wound shut. He would have to help her bathe when he brought her home.

“Do I need to call nurse Ratched in here to force feed you?” she quipped weakly.

Hopper’s eyes widened in amusement. “You—”

“Saw *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, yes, it was playing at the Hawk a few weeks ago,” Erin said, satisfied in Hopper’s reaction. “My threat still stands, chief.”

Hopper sighed. “You’re quite the stubborn one, aren’t you?”

She smiled. “You’re just now figuring that out?”

Hopper scoffed. “Fine,” he said. “But I’m bringing my coffee back up here.”

“Fair’s fair,” Erin said. “Not just coffee though. *Food.*”

Hopper stood, and bent down to kiss Erin’s forehead. “Yes boss.”

She smiled, and lightly touched his cheek as he pulled away from her. “Hey…” she beckoned him closer.

“You’re concussed…” he chided gently.

“Shut up and kiss me,” she whispered, and with a chuckle, Hopper

leaned in and gave her a sweet kiss on the lips.

When he had gone, Erin's eyes were once again weighted. She dozed a moment before her eyes flickered open again. A figure stood at the foot of her hospital bed. She didn't give it another thought until she saw that the shape was definitively *not*Jim Hopper. She squinted and opened her eyes.

Before her, clad in a suit, was a man with white hair and a scowling expression.

In her infirmed state, Erin briefly forgot that Martin Brenner was not a normal apparition in her life. At one time, it wouldn't have given her pause.

"No," she whispered. Her eyes remained heavy. She forced them open.

"What's happened to you, my darling?" he said, making his way to her bedside. He stood there casually, his hands in his pockets, looking down at her as he used to do.

"You're not real," she said. "You're not here."

"Of course I'm real, Four," he said. He sat on her bed, and Erin felt the mattress shift beside her. He removed a hand from his pocket and placed it on the bed.

She reached forward, and before she could touch his hand to establish contact, he captured her wrist. From his other pocket, he pulled out a small syringe, which he plunged immediately into the crook of her elbow.

"What are you doing?" she said, raising her voice.

He kept his low. "Just a beta-blocker," he said. "And a little something else thrown in. Can't have you flexing your full powers right now—not when your concussion is still so fresh."

Tears escaped from Erin's eyes as she struggled against Brenner's grip. He placed the syringe into his breast pocket, and focused his energy on her.

“I’ll scream,” she said.

Brenner shook his head. “No you won’t.”

“What do you want?” she hissed.

“All of that in time, darling,” he said, and stood. “I had to make sure you were alright. But we’ll be seeing each other soon. *I’ll* come to *you.*”

He turned to leave, and as he did, the cocktail he had given her took full effect, lowering her blood pressure, and causing her to lose consciousness for another twenty minutes before Hopper returned.

When Hopper returned, no trace of Brenner remained. He kissed Erin’s forehead to lightly wake her. As had been happening all night, her eyes fluttered open. Her eyes scrunched in confusion as she saw Hopper’s face instead of Brenner’s.

“He was here,” she said, and her breathing picked up.

“The shadow monster?” Hopper asked in confusion.

“*Brenner*,” she said forcefully.

“What?” Hopper said. “That’s… Erin, you’ve been in and out all night. You’ve got a head injury. Brenner wasn’t here.”

Tears fell from her eyes. “He was here, and he gave me something,” she said, looking at the red mark on her arm where the needle had gone in.

“That’s where they put the saline drip in before,” he said, trying to calm her down.

“God damn it, Jim,” she said, trying to sit up. She put her hand on his chest to establish contact and to show him what she had seen. She furrowed her brows and nothing happened. “It’s not…” she tried again. “He gave me something, Jim, and I can’t show you. I can’t do anything.”

Hopper shook his head. “You’ve had a head injury.”

"*That's what he said*," she said, and warned him with her eyes.

Suddenly it was like Hopper had a bucket of ice water thrown on him. He stood from his stooped position, and left Erin's hospital room to search the nearby hallways. He was gone a few minutes before he returned, panting slightly. He shook his head.

"He's gone now," he said. He cursed under his breath.

"You have to take me home," Erin said. She started to sit up, but Hopper pushed her back.

"You're staying overnight for observation. I'm not taking you home," he said, and Erin knew that was final.

"Eleven," Erin said. At home with Tabor and Jillian—arguably as well guarded as she was ever going to be, but still, Hopper had to be sure.

He rushed into the hall and used the pay phone to call Erin's house. Tabor answered sleepily after four rings. When Tabor agreed to call in a half hour to check in, Hopper returned to Erin's room.

"Hopper, you need to go protect her," she said.

"What about you, huh? Whatever he gave you, he made you completely defenseless. What if this is what he wants? To get me to leave you here alone?"

Erin's jaw flexed. "I'm fine. He's not coming back."

"If he was going to take her, he would have done it by now. He wouldn't have given warning," Hopper said, hoping to convince himself as much as he was hoping to convince Erin. "I'm not leaving you here alone."

Erin nodded, relenting. "He's not so stupid he would try to go after her right now. If he was really here at all, Hopper," Erin said, and Hopper could see the doubt in her eyes. "But this is what he does. We won't even have to try to find him," she chuckled. "He'll come back… He always comes back."

Hopper's jaw flexed. After all that had happened today, Martin Brenner still managed to fuck everything sideways.

The water in the tub finally started to run hot. With a few twists, Hopper found the perfect temperature balance, and started filling Erin's claw-footed tub. When it was full enough, he shut the water off, and turned to her. She sat on the lid of the toilet, visibly exhausted. She stood dutifully, and complied as Hopper helped her shed every piece of clothing.

With his help, she lowered herself into the bath, and sighed in relief.

It was early in the morning after her fall, and Erin wanted to get cleaned up before she was confined to bed rest for the day. She sat pensively, gripping the side of the tub. Hopper dunked the plastic pitcher he'd swiped from the kitchen into the water.

"Lean your head back," he said. "We've got to try to keep this wound dry."

Erin did as she was told, and Hopper poured water on her hair, staying clear of the wound. When he had finished with her hair, he lathered up a washcloth with soap, and started on her arms. Hopper gently wiped away all traces of Erin's trip to the ER. She closed her eyes in contentment.

"Lean forward," Hopper said, and Erin again did as she was told.

Hopper swept Erin's wet hair to the side, and he washed her back.

"What are we going to do, Jim?" Erin asked, staring at the drain.

"We'll figure it out."

"Can you call that doctor? The one who helped you with Eleven's adoption? Maybe he knows something about why he's back."

"Maybe he does," he said. "I'll call him."

"Thank you," Erin said quietly. She looked up at Hopper, and gave a small smile.

Hopper gave a half smirk, and put his hand on the back of her neck in a comforting gesture.

When Erin had dressed in pajamas and a cotton robe, and came out into the kitchen, Eleven ran to her, and hugged her middle.

“Easy,” Hopper warned Eleven.

Erin smiled up at Hopper, assuring him it was okay. Erin held Eleven to herself in a hug.

“Now what are you doing home from school, missy?” Erin asked, looking down at Eleven. Eleven looked up at her sheepishly.

“She’s right,” Hopper said. “You’ve only missed first and second period,” Hopper added, looking at his watch. “You brought your backpack here last night, right?”

“*Yeees*,” Eleven said in a grumble.

“Well there you go, no excuses,” Hopper said. “I’m going to take you in. Will you be okay?”

“Infirmed, but fine,” Erin said, and sat gingerly at the kitchen table.

“Okay,” Hopper said, not completely believing his own words. Without a thought, he leaned down and kissed Erin’s temple.

Eleven’s eyes went wide, and her smile just as far. Hopper realized then what he had just done. He bristled and sighed.

“You didn’t see that, kid,” he said, and started to shuffle Eleven out the door.

Erin giggled, and smiled at Hopper one last time before they disappeared out the back entrance of the house. When Erin heard Hopper’s Bronco leave the driveway, she set to making herself a cup of coffee.

Erin smiled at the coffee maker absently as it started to percolate, gurgling loudly. The display of affection in front of Eleven meant that Hopper was ready to tell Eleven about them.

With her mug pulled down from the cabinet, Erin's hand paused on the handle of the coffee pot. Her head started to pound. Something was off. Maybe it was the concussion, or maybe it was the lingering effects of whatever Brenner had injected into her that dulled her senses, but Erin was positive that someone was in her house.

When she turned around to act on her instinct, she came face to face with Brenner standing in the doorway to the kitchen.

"Hello again, Four," Brenner said. He took small steps towards Erin, who dug deep in her mind for her abilities.

"*Stop*," she commanded. She felt the telltale trickle of blood coming from her nose, but her stomach turned to ice when she saw that Brenner smirked and kept advancing on her. How long would the drug dampen her power, she wondered.

Behind him came two men in civilian clothes, but they looked like their normal wares were on the camouflage side of the color spectrum.

"Now Four," Brenner said, advancing on her. She stood frozen, leaning against the kitchen countertop. "I just want to talk. Now that Eleven and Chief Hopper are gone, we can do that, wouldn't you say?"

"I have nothing to say to you," Erin spat, and drew in her breath when Brenner stopped a mere foot in front of her.

"That may change, when you hear what I have to say," Brenner said, and leaned forward.

Erin leaned back, sure he was going to kiss her, but instead he grabbed the coffee pot, and Erin stepped aside to watch him pour coffee into her mug. She thought briefly of striking him, but something stayed her hand. Something deep in her that she hated.

After he had poured her coffee, he grabbed a mug of his own, and brought the both of them to the kitchen table.

He set the mugs down, and sat casually, crossing his long legs.

“Please, Four,” he said, and gestured for the chair opposite him. “Sit. I just want to talk.”

Erin breathed heavily for a moment, still frozen. “*Let’s get one thing straight*,” she hissed, and advanced on him. The two plainclothes military men took one step forward, as if they were ready to subdue her if necessary. With the concussion and the beta-blocker running through her veins, it would have been easy.

She looked from one goon to the other, and cooled her jets a moment. She stood next to her chair.

“*My name*,” she intoned, “is Erin. And if you want to have a conversation with me, you’ll use the name *my mother* gave me at birth.”

Brenner sighed and frowned. He deliberated a moment, and relented. “Erin,” he said, “please sit and talk with me. I don’t wish you any harm.”

Her head started to throb, and her vision went a little blurry. She sat a little less gracefully than she had intended.

“I’ll save my questions about what happened to you until later,” Brenner reasoned. “I hope you’ll trust me enough to tell me.”

Erin kept her mouth shut.

Brenner sighed. “You know that the program is done. But Fou— *Erin*… I’m under orders from the military to bring you to heel. You *and*Eleven. They want to work *with*you. But if you don’t, then, darling… I can’t promise they won’t use force if necessary.”

“So you think this is how you’ll get me to trust you, hmm?” Erin said, grabbing her coffee if only to stop her hands from shaking. “Threaten me into coming back?”

“They’re offering you a life. Monitored, of course, but different than the lab. I should have seen that then, what we were doing, it wasn’t… *fair*… to all of you,” he said, with considerable effort.

“We’re human beings, Brenner,” Erin said. “You cursed us from the

womb, and we were born into a prison of your making. None of it was fair. And the only way to make it right is to *leave us alone*."

"That's not up to me anymore," he said, smugly.

Erin, incensed, tried to focus her power, to read his thoughts. Another rush of blood came from her nose, which surprised her. Her nosebleeds only came when she persuaded others.

She wiped the blood from her nose with the pads of her fingers and looked at them in shock.

"Trying to read my mind, Erin?" Brenner taunted, leaning forward. "Until that drug is out of your system, any time you try to use your gift, that will happen."

"So you mean to tell me," Erin said, wiping the blood on a napkin from the center of the table, "that the government—the same government that was publicly humiliated for the death of the Holland girl, Barbara—just decided to get their hands dirty again with this whole mess? No. I don't buy it."

"Buy it or don't," Brenner countered, "the fact is, they've seen what you can do and they want you back."

Erin sat there, shaking her head, a scowl on her face. "*They* want me back," Erin repeated, raising her eyebrows.

Brenner opened his mouth to speak, but the whir of Hopper's Bronco motor slowly approached Erin's house, and a second later, the engine shut off. Erin heard the car door close. She stood abruptly, and Brenner descended on her.

The two goons drew guns from their belts, and pointed them at the entry to the kitchen.

"Say anything, and he's dead," Brenner warned coldly.

Brenner grabbed Erin's arms, and spun her so she was in front of him. He secured her arms behind her, putting her on display for Hopper, who was nearing the kitchen.

Hopper's voice came from the living room, and carried to the kitchen.

"Hey, you still up? I smell coffee—after last night, I think I'm gonna need the whole—"

Hopper stopped dead in his tracks as he entered the kitchen, when he saw two men with guns drawn on him, and Brenner holding Erin's arms behind her back.

12. Not an Act

Hopper's instincts told him to go for his gun, and that's exactly what he did. When his hand met his belt, both of the soldiers drew down on him again, reestablishing that *they* were the ones who would be pointing guns.

"Don't be stupid, Chief Hopper," Brenner said. "Erin and I were just having a polite conversation before we were interrupted."

"Is that why you've got her hands behind her back? Don't think I'd call that polite." Hopper asked, and Erin could see the fear in his eyes.

"Agree to disagree," he said. "Now sit down. And listen to what I have to say."

Hopper stood his ground.

"Jim, please," Erin said, letting out a small sob. She couldn't lose him. It would break her in two. "Do what he says."

Hopper's jaw flexed a moment as he considered. Tersely, he sat in the chair that Brenner had occupied only a moment before. The two plainclothes soldiers took a few steps closer to Jim, and kept their weapons trained on him.

"That's better," Brenner said, loosening his grip on Erin's wrists. He kept one of her wrists in his hand, and guided her to her chair, pulling her sideways. When she landed abruptly in the chair, Hopper's nostrils flared.

With his free hand he pulled another kitchen chair next to Erin's with a loud scrape, and sat with more grace than he had afforded her. With Erin's wrist still in his hand, Brenner pulled out a little bit of his own assurance that neither Hopper nor Erin would retaliate. He pulled a capped syringe out of his pocket, and flicked the cap off like it was nothing. He held it at the ready, between his fingers, and rested it on his knee.

“You’ve already got me drugged, Brenner,” Erin said, looking sidelong at the syringe. “What’s that for?”

“Oh, just another dose in case you feel like your old self again,” he added with a smile that betrayed nothing of the severity of their predicament.

“Now,” Brenner said, “there are a few things to get out of the way. My expectation is that when I leave this house, Erin, you will come with me of your own free will.”

Erin guffawed and looked up at the ceiling briefly. “It’s not free will if it’s coerced. Don’t you remember anything, *papa*?”

Brenner flinched a moment, but overcame it. “It didn’t feel too coerced last year in that hotel room, Erin, or have you forgotten already?”

“Stop this!” Erin said to Brenner, looking at Hopper a moment, her eyebrows peaked in sadness. “You could have just let me go. The program is finished.”

“You’re my greatest achievement, Erin,” Brenner crooned, letting her wrist go, and bringing his hand up to her face. He ran his knuckles down her jaw, and Erin flinched. “Should I let you waste your extraordinary talents in a place like this? Should I let Eleven?”

“You son of a bitch, she’s just a child!” Erin growled.

“A very *gifted* child… and the two of you *together*…” Brenner couldn’t help the Cheshire smile that played on his face. “A force to be reckoned with. Now that the military knows… Well, let’s just say that it’s in your best interest to cooperate right now.”

“*My daughter*,” Hopper thundered, “will be staying with me.”

“I’m more her father than you, Chief Hopper,” Brenner said. “You think a little fudged paperwork and a town with a short memory means she’s yours? I have something with her you’ll never understand.”

“Like you had with Erin?” Hopper retorted.

Brenner chuckled. “No. That’s something that can’t be matched, I’m afraid. But enough idle chat—Here’s how this will work. Erin, you’ll come with me, or your siblings will be the first to meet a swift end. After that, well… I cannot guarantee the safety of Chief Hopper here, the Byers family…”

Erin could practically hear her heart pounding in her chest. “Enough. I’ll come with you, just—just stop this.”

“There’s my girl,” he said. “Now, when Eleven comes home from school, she—”

“No,” Erin said forcefully. “Just me. This is the deal I’m making now.”

“Erin, *stop*,” Hopper warned.

“I’m sorry Jim, but I have to… This is the only way,” she allowed herself one look at Hopper, and turned to Brenner. “I swear this to you. You will take only me, and leave Eleven alone for the rest of her life, or I swear I will find a way to end my own life before you have a chance to use it for your own gain.”

Brenner considered a moment. “You wouldn’t.”

“*I would.*” Erin’s eyes blazed. “Do we have a deal or not?”

“*God damn it,*” Hopper swore to himself.

“Your full cooperation?” Brenner replied, ignoring the emotional chief.

“Full and complete,” Erin said, and felt the pit in her stomach grow. She would have to claw herself out of this mess, but it meant digging herself so deep she wasn’t sure she would manage the escape.

“It will be a hard sell to the powers above me,” he reasoned.

“Put me in a room with them, and I’ll set their minds at ease.”

Brenner gave a half smirk. “You’ll forgive me if I hold off on that until you’ve proven yourself.”

Erin sighed. "*Do we have a deal or not*?"

Brenner's eyebrows raised a hair, and he considered a moment. "For now. Until they say otherwise."

Erin looked at Hopper. His eyes pleaded with her.

"Well I see no reason to loiter around," Brenner said, and placed his hand on Erin's arm, under her armpit, and brought her to stand. "A deal's a deal."

"*God damn it, Martin*, just give me a moment, will you?" Erin barked, and wrenched her arm away from him. "Can you give me that much?"

Surprising her, he nodded, and Erin went to a now-standing Hopper. Erin wrapped her arms around his neck, and he pulled her to him in the tightest embrace he'd ever given her.

"Don't do this," Hopper whispered in her ear. "We can take them," he reasoned.

Erin chuckled, and pulled back to look at him. She took his face in her hands, and considered him a moment, and then brought her lips to his in a loving kiss. She wanted to make Brenner hurt, and with that gesture, she had succeeded.

When she pulled away from him, she leaned in to his ear, and whispered something so softly that even Hopper had a hard time hearing her.

"Trust me. When you get the sign from me, hide her." *Eleven*. Hide Eleven.

Not wanting Erin to linger any longer, Brenner pulled her away. Erin let herself be pulled away. When Brenner pulled her out of the kitchen, and marched her through the house towards the front door, Erin felt her heart sink with each step.

When she reached the black sedan ready to take her away, she stole one final glance at the little house she had called her own. The two soldiers followed soon after, and with their arrival, Erin felt real fear.

She had kept her composure until that moment, but when Hopper appeared at her doorstep ready to run after her, she shook her head. Tears fell from her eyes, and she allowed herself to cry. Seeing her tears, Brenner huffed.

"*In the car*, Erin," he chided.

Erin slid into the back seat, and Brenner after her. When the sedan quickly pulled away, Brenner leaned over her and secured her seatbelt for her. When the belt had clicked, he looked up to find Erin looking down at him with the most menacing look he had ever seen. Her eyes shone with tears, but were lit with fire.

"You look at me like that now, Erin," Brenner started, "but that will pass. This life here, this is nothing compared to what we have."

New tears met the tracks already tracing her face. "Put me out," Erin murmured to her lap.

"What's that, dear?" Brenner asked, tipping her chin up so she faced him.

"If you don't put me out now, I can't guarantee I won't violate our agreement," she hissed. "But mostly I just don't want to look at your face."

Brenner sighed, and pulled the syringe out of his inner coat pocket. "Have it your way, Erin."

With a pinch, and a moment of cloudy thoughts, Erin's world went dark.

When she woke, the light was blinding. The white of the floors, the walls, the bed, was too much. She swung her feet out of bed and swayed a moment. The cocktail Brenner had created packed quite the wallop. She flexed her mental muscles a moment, and found that when she tried to create fire in her palm, nothing happened.

When the reality of that sunk in, Erin's pulse quickened. She would have to do this the hard way. To get Brenner to trust her enough to stop administering medication, it would be hard work. But she

thought maybe she could do it… After all, what good was all that training if she couldn't use it on her own jailers?

Just as she was accepting her reality, the door behind her opened, and the man who took up so much space in her dreams stood there in his slacks, but his jacket and tie were gone. He had a few buttons undone at his neck, and the look struck Erin dumb for a moment. Their eyes met, and at that, Erin turned away and faced ahead. Still, she heard his shoes tapping on the tile floor as he came to sit on the other bed in front of her.

"How are you feeling?" he asked, like it was nothing.

Erin swallowed her pride, her desire to lash out and strangle the man. But alas… no tie. Was that deliberate?

She took a deep breath. "Like I had a concussion in the last day, and I keep being pumped with mind altering drugs." She kept her tone neutral.

Brenner nodded. "It's a necessary evil for the time being. When we've established a little trust between us, I may consider scaling back your doses, or stopping them entirely."

Erin nodded and bit the inside of her lip a moment. "How do I know you haven't taken Eleven already?"

"We have eyes everywhere, Erin. I would have thought you knew that much by now. Come with me."

Brenner led Erin through the old familiar hallways of the Hawkins Lab to an AV room, where Brenner ordered two technicians out. When they were alone, Brenner asked Erin to sit, and she complied, her face stony.

Brenner switched one of the televisions over to another channel, and Erin's heart jumped when she saw Hopper sitting at a kitchen table with Eleven, the two of them eating in silence. It was Hopper's house.

"How do I know this is now?" Erin asked.

"I can provide more evidence in time, Erin, but you'll need to earn

that."

Erin bristled. She sat watching Jim and Eleven. A thought occurred to her.

"Where else have you put cameras?" she looked up at Brenner with steely resolve.

Brenner inclined his head a moment. He considered the woman before him, and then pressed a few buttons on the control panel. Erin looked back to the television.

The scene before her was her own room. For a moment, Erin felt as if she might throw up. What had Brenner seen? Before she had a chance to ask, she saw herself, and Jim, meet the bed. Erin pulled a dress over her head, and crawled back onto the bed, and waited for Jim, who kissed his way up her bare legs, stopping only to say a few unheard words to Erin.

Erin knew what those words were.

I love how you taste.

The thought of it almost made Erin sob, but she kept it together. As Jim pleasured Erin, Erin looked up at Brenner, and watched him watch the scene unfold.

His face was hardened. One arm crossed his body, and the other hand drew up to his mouth, and he drew his finger across his chin in contemplation.

"I'll say this much, Erin, I taught you well," he said.

"It's not an act," she said in a moment of defiance, forgetting herself, forgetting her great task of winning him over again. She knew now it would be even harder than she thought.

"I know you think that," Brenner said, and tucked Erin's messy hair behind her ear. She fought the urge to flinch. "I do admire your fight for your moment of freedom, Erin, but you must see that your place is here… With me."

“*With* you?” Erin asked, wishing for clarification.

Brenner leaned down, and put his hands on each of Erin’s armrests. His face was inches from hers. “I felt it that night in that hotel, Erin. We’re not done with each other. If you’ll stop fighting it, I think you’ll see what I see.”

Brenner considered her frozen expression a moment, and leaned forward. With one hand, he tipped her chin up, and kissed her tentatively. Erin drew in a breath sharply, but she neither responded nor shrank from him.

Brenner pulled away, and pulled Erin by the hand to join him standing. He led her by the hand out of the AV room, and with one stolen glance back at the television, Erin watched as Jim Hopper found home inside her. Erin’s head fell to one side in rapt pleasure.

No, she thought. *Not an act.*

Notes for the Chapter:

> Hi folks! Thanks for sticking with me. Lots of big life moments at home this summer (remodeling and working my ass off), but I have set a little goal for myself. I want to participate in NaNoWriMo (national novel writing month), and I would feel guilty about doing that if I haven't at least finished or made progress with this fic. So here we are. An update! I love all your comments, and will try my best to not wait another three months for another update.